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*Interconnected In-Between: On the  
dynamics of abjection, animism,  
temporality and location in nomadic art  
practice*

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
PhD at the University of the Arts London

University of the Arts, London  
CCW Graduate School  
Chelsea College of Arts,  
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# Abstract

This practice based PhD research is conducted through my installations *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013). It is a journey from the sites of propagation - marginalised villages in the outskirts of Beijing and a forgotten Buddhist temple in Chongqing, Central China - through the production processes to exhibitions in global venues. This research examines the potentiality of nomadism as a political position. This specific agency provides a unique setting through which this inquiry makes a contribution to the field of contemporary art in the contexts of globalisation, nomadic subjectivity, new materialism and the posthuman/postanthropocentric condition, and to visual language. It argues for a more ethical and material relationship with others, human and non-human. I examine how transformative, intersubjective relations, nomadic politics, extensive lived experience, local knowledge and different levels of collaboration might be addressed by my artworks and how these processes might be encountered by the viewer. I explore how the use of these different fluid connections in my work might transform our sense of ourselves and our relationship with others, human or not. As a process of re-reading and reconstituting, starting from specific cultural details like those of Chinese village graveyards, and interconnecting spatial, historical, socio-political and metaphysical reconfiguration, the research project examines the possibilities of merging them with emergent, unexpected bodies of knowledge and systems of interdependence.

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical notion of abjection is a frame of reference through which I develop methodological tools. In this research, I situate this psychoanalytical, Eurocentric and rather limited notion in more anthropological and extended fields of relationships, especially in relation to notions such as 'becoming' (Gilles Deleuze) and animism (Anselm Franke), and to local knowledge and nomadic discourses (Rosi Braidotti). I do this in order to examine how oppositional relations between the Self and the Other and dualistic concepts might be transformed.

I evaluate my research in dialogic relation to other artists' works, via reflexive conversations alongside theoretical propositions and in relation to my political nomadic position as a researcher and practitioner.

This research leads to a re-evaluation of how concepts of abjection and resistance might be rethought in art practice. By integrating processes of abjection with Deleuzian 'becoming', my artworks explore how transformative processes of, for example, material(ities), rituals or pollution, might be engendered in systems of relations in which oppositional relations between subjects and objects (human and non-human) are destabilised and operate inclusively.

# Statement of Original Authorship

I confirm that the thesis has not been submitted for a comparable academic award.

January 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'KK' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Kristiina Koskentola

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the core members of my supervisory team, Dr Mo Throp and Dr Maria Walsh, as well as Dr Haley Newman and Sutapa Biswas, for their support, patience and enthusiasm for my work. Further, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the individual practitioners and theorists who participated via recorded conversations: Mika Hannula, Ma Yongfeng, Alessandro Rolandi, Megumi Shimizu (Qingshui Huimei) and Yu Bogong. I am also grateful to Huang Xiaopeng and Mr Wang for their insightful comments, as well as to all artists (or their agents) who allowed me to submit their work to this inquiry. In addition, I would like to articulate my appreciation to my assistants Zhang Yueyue and Li Xinrui, to Qing Shifu and all my neighbours in Caochangdi village in Beijing, as well as all institutions involved, galleries and audiences, and the funding bodies who generously supported this research: Arts Promotion Centre Finland, Frame Contemporary Art Finland, Kone Foundation, Amsterdam Fund for the Arts and University of the Arts Student Support Fund. Finally, I am grateful to my partner Rob Jeuring for his support and patience.

# Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	1
SECTION 1. ON APPROACHING THE INSTALLATION <i>ONE HUNDRED TEN THOUSAND</i> (2011-12) .....	21
1.1. ENCOUNTERS ON THE SITE .....	21
1.2. MOULDING THE METHODS .....	30
1.3. METHODS IN PRACTICE .....	35
1.4. CURSES AND SOLUTIONS .....	47
1.5. MATTER(S) .....	49
1.6. FROM TEXT TO SPEECH .....	61
1.7. EXHIBITION OF THE INSTALLATION <i>ONE HUNDRED TEN THOUSAND</i> (2011-12) .....	64
1.8. REFLECTION AND DIALOGUES .....	76
1.9. FINDINGS .....	90
SECTION 2. ON APPROACHING THE 'COALWORKS': INSTALLATIONS <i>RITUALS TO MUTATIONS</i> (2013) AND <i>BLACKBALLING</i> (2013) .....	94
2.1. ENCOUNTERS – ABOUT OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS .....	94
2.2. CIRCULAR MOVEMENTS .....	102
2.3. FRAMES, CHANNELS AND SOUNDS – LOSING THE LANGUAGE .....	112
2.4. ENCOUNTERS IN THE TEMPLE .....	115
2.5. CLOSE TO THE BALL .....	118
2.6. THE ROLLING COAL BALL – CONNECTING CONTEXTS .....	121
2.7. FROM VIRTUAL TO MATERIAL .....	132
2.8. PRODUCTIONS .....	136
2.9. INSTALLATIONS – <i>RITUALS TO MUTATIONS</i> (2013) AND <i>BLACKBALLING</i> (2013) .....	139
2.10. REFLECTION AND DIALOGUES .....	146
2.11. FINDINGS .....	153
CONCLUSION .....	156
GLOSSARY .....	159
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND OTHER REFERENCES .....	162
HYPERLINKS .....	165
SEMINARS/SYMPOSIUMS ATTENDED (SELECTION) .....	169
VIRTUAL LECTURES (SELECTION) .....	170
OTHER ARTISTS' WORKS .....	172
IMPORTANT EXHIBITIONS TO THIS THESIS (SELECTION) .....	173
APPENDIX .....	174
APPENDIX A. FULL AUDIO PIECE <i>ONE HUNDRED TEN THOUSAND</i> (2011-12) IN WRITING. ....	174
APPENDIX B. PRESS RELEASES OF SELECTED EXHIBITIONS .....	177
APPENDIX C: LIST OF DISCUSSION REFERRED TO IN THE THESIS .....	180
APPENDIX D. LIST OF EXHIBITIONS, PRESENTATIONS, PUBLICATION, PRIZES AND FUNDING .....	181

## Tables and Figures

Images 1-2. Site of encounter/ outside Qianweikou village .....	23
Images 3 and 4. Street view, Caochangdi urban village, Beijing 2014 .....	24
Entrance to my studio compound, 'Iowa', Caochangdi, 2014 .....	25
Village life Dongba township, Beijing 2014. ....	25
Image 7. Detail map of the villages in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing ..	36
Image 8. Map showing the village Caochangdi (where I live) in Beijing .....	36
Image 9. Prayer pillow for sale outside a shop close to Lama Temple in Beijing .....	54
Image 10. Sketch to demonstrate alterations done to integrate the gravestone with the Taoist prayer pillow .....	54
Image 11. Teresa Margolles, El agua en la Ciudad de México (Mexico City's water) [ <i>Aire</i> ], Installation with 2-3 warm mist humidifiers, 2001 .....	57
Image 12. Feng Shui at Babaoshan Revolutionary cemetery, Beijing 2011 ..	60
Image 13. Feng Shui at Qianweikou village graveyard .....	60
Images 14 and 15. <i>One Hundred Ten Thousand</i> (2011-12) .....	65
Image 16. Close-up of prayer pillows in <i>One Hundred Ten Thousand</i> (2011- 12) .....	66
Image 17. Audio <i>One Hundred Ten Thousand</i> (2011-12) .....	66
Image 18. Sketch of the installation .....	67
Image 19. Photo series of eight <i>One Hundred Ten Thousand</i> (2011-12) .....	69
Image 20. Handwritten documents, framed to protect them as they are one the kind .....	70
Image 21. Close-up of one of the documents .....	71
Image 22. Side building with power plant as the backdrop to Dongjiao crematorium, 2012 .....	72
Image 23. Side building, Dongjiao crematorium 2012 .....	72
Image 24. Main building, Dongjiao crematorium 2012 .....	73
Image 25. Ash release room Dongjiao crematorium 2012 .....	73
Image 26. Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, <i>Bosbolobosboco 6</i> (Departure– Transit–..... Arrival) (2014) .....	79
Image 27. Zachary Formwalt, <i>A Projective Geometry</i> (2012) .....	83
Image 28. Idem .....	83
Image 29. Close-up of a coal ball on a studio floor .....	93
Image 30. Pile of coal balls, dry and freshly rolled, Caochangdi, Beijing 2013 .....	99
Image 31. Worker shoving coal, Iowa Community, Caohangdi 2014 .....	99
Image 32. Central heating, Tang Shifu, showing coal to the furnace, Iowa Community 2014 .....	100
Image 33. View from my studio door .....	100

Image 34. Coal reserves at the CCD 300 compound courtyard, Caochangdi, Beijing 2014 .....	101
Image 35. Close-up of the previous.....	101
Image 36. Qing Shifu rolling balls from the left over crumbs and dust of a coal pile, swept together .....	104
Image 37. Qing Shifu concentrating on the ball rolling act about to start ....	104
Image 38. Qing Shifu taking a break from the coal ball rolling.....	105
Image 39. Close-up of some coal balls .....	106
Image 40. Photographic sketch for the video. Dragon and Phoenix, Chongqing 2013 .....	109
Image 41. Head monk preparing for a ceremony at Dragon and Phoenix...	109
Image 42. Map locating Chongqing in China and in relation to Beijing .....	110
Image 43. View on Yangtze river, Chongqing 2013 .....	110
Images 44-45. Stills from edited video channel 1 .....	117
Images 46-47. Stills from edited video 2 .....	119
Image 48. Video still from the coal ball rolling performance .....	122
Image 49. The neighbour's dog.....	122
Images 50-52. Pouring of water by the worker in the mixture of coal, soil and water .....	123
Images 53-55. Burning of incense and rubbish in the Holy Furnace .....	124
Images 56-57. Potential relations for transformative processes.....	125
Images 58-60. The ritual of purification .....	125
Images 61-62. Video stills from edited videos .....	127
Images 63 and 64. Details projection installation <i>Rituals to Mutations</i> (2013), studio in Beijing 2013.....	130
Image 66. Santiago Sierra, <i>133 personas remuneradas para ser teñidas de rubio</i> .....	134
Image 67. Sketch to visualise the installations <i>Rituals to Mutations</i> (2013) and <i>Blackballing</i> (2013) .....	140
Images 68 and 69. <i>Rituals to Mutations</i> (2013) on 46" Nec monitors .....	141
Image 70-72. Overviews of exhibition 'Coalworks': <i>Rituals to Mutations</i> (2013) and <i>Blackballing</i> (2013).....	142
Image 73. <i>Blackballing</i> (2013).....	143
Image 74. <i>Blackballing</i> (2013), close-up of coal balls .....	143
Image 75. <i>Blackballing</i> (2013), close-up of cues .....	143
Image 76. Ni Haifeng, <i>Para-Production</i> , 2008-2012 .....	147



## Attached DVD

Documentation of the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) in Star Gallery Beijing, March-April 2016 (same documentation in two formats for the convenience of the reader, pps and pdf)

Audio piece installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12); English (7.11, mp3) and Mandarin (5.53, mp3). Excerpt recorded in the exhibition space (1.00 mov)

Images of handwritten documents (3x jpg)

Documentation on the solo exhibition 'Coalworks', displaying *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013), Gallery Huuto, Helsinki 1.1.-17.1. 2016 (same documentation in two formats for the convenience of the reader, pps and pdf)

Video documentation of the exhibition 'Coalworks' (5.01, mov)

Video documentation of *Rituals to Mutations* (2013), four channels edited in one (loop, mov)

# Introduction

This PhD research is led by my practice and comprises three of my installations: the multisensory piece *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12); the four-channel HD video installation *Rituals to Mutations* (2013); and the mixed-media installation of objects *Blackballing* (2013). This research journey is embedded in the daily life of the semi-industrial (and semi-legal) suburban migrant worker villages in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing, PRC, Caochangdi, Qianweikou, and the former Zhangwangfeng, as well as a forgotten Buddhist temple along the Yangtze river in Chongqing, Central China. This research takes the reader through my projects, from the sites I investigated in China, through the production processes, the exhibitions and their presentation (in China and other global locations). Through this, I seek to re-evaluate how concepts of abjection and resistance<sup>1</sup> have been addressed in art practice, and to make a contribution to the field of contemporary art in the context of globalisation, new materialism,<sup>2</sup> nomadic subjectivity<sup>3</sup> and the posthuman<sup>4</sup> condition, and to visual language. In this thesis I argue, through an encounter with the artwork, for a more ethical and material relationship with others, human and non-human.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis contains a large amount of visual material from the exhibitions of all three installations as well as from the sites and contexts I was working, which are documented in the chapters. The attached DVD contains video and audio documentation of the actual exhibitions in different locations. While there are plenty of images in this thesis, it might be advisable for the reader to look into the documentation on the DVD before reading the text, especially regarding video and soundscapes as well as the audio components of the installations.

The three installations I developed in this research are:

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, resistance is embedded and emerges in the context of global capitalism and its exclusive and hierarchical structures of investment: abuse and political economy of commodification of all that lives and our environment.

Resistance as agency, critical expression or statement performed or generated by the artwork.

<sup>2</sup> New Materialism is a term separately coined by Rosi Braidotti and Manel De Landa. It is a category of theories and movements of several fields that were generated as a response to the linguistic turn. New Materialism attempts to offer a different perspective on signification, materiality and methodologies for knowledge production that are both ontological and epistemological. It aims to criticise anthropocentrism, rethink subjectivity, emphasise the self-organising powers of materials and explore dissonant relations between these (self-organising) processes and cultural practice. Moreover, new materialism is concerned with rethinking ethics and globalisation in a planetary dimension.

In this research, I am particularly concerned with vital materialism.

<sup>3</sup> Nomadic subjectivity as subjectivity in flux. It is a cartographical tool that is concerned with ethics and politics of different modes of mobility – materialistic mappings of situated, embedded and embodied social positions in the age of global capitalism and hybridity. It is a subjectivity that references diversity and difference, and operates outside the essentialist identity politics and polarisation of nation-states, being intrinsically other in relation to dominant hierarchies.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'posthuman' literally means a 'person or entity that exists in a state beyond being human'. In critical theory, the posthuman is a speculative being that represents or seeks to reconceive the notion of the historical human: the core of a posthuman sensibility is the aim of overcoming anthropocentrism.

<sup>5</sup> In this thesis, non-human refers to organic, material and living forces and beings, the in-human to structural relationships, such as the cultural, the political, the collective, the cosmic and the supernatural.

- One Hundred Ten Thousand (2011-12), Beijing.

Multisensory installation, consisting of objects (modified Taoist prayer pillows made of Chinese brocade filled with sand, soil, tree bark, tea and ash), two photo series, documents, odour and audio.

- *Rituals to Mutations* (2013), Beijing and Chongqing

Four-channel HD video installation, soundscape (of environmental acoustics)

- *Blackballing* (2013), Beijing

Installation of coal balls and billiard cues covered with pulverised coal

I set out to question how to incorporate materials, processes and spatialities in order to offer the potential to reconfigure relations between subjects and objects.

The key questions that I propose to address through a reflective and reflexive account of the process of making my artworks and the reception they received are:

- How are nomadic politics, extensive lived experience, local knowledge and different levels of collaboration incorporated in my artworks and how to communicate these processes to the viewer?
- How might my installations propose a more expansive account of abjection which allows for a new kind of agency beyond the limited notions of psychoanalytical and Eurocentric positioning of Subjects and Objects? I expand these questions through a consideration of Deleuze's notion of 'becoming', animism and nomadic modes of temporality and location within my artworks.
- What kinds of union between meaning and material might this generate? And how might they be propagated beyond the sites and places (of origin), across cultural geographies and into other realms? What kind of ethical implications might all of this entail and generate?
- What possibilities for transformative, inclusive and intersubjective relations among humans and between them and their others can be developed in my artworks, using this conceptual approach?

The key aims I set for myself are:

- To consider the encounter between author, viewer, artwork, context(s) and the (human) subject's relationship to the materiality of my artworks.
  - To examine how the experience of artwork has agency in transforming these aforementioned relations.
- To challenge an understanding of the psychoanalytic notion of abjection by situating my installations in more relational e.g. socio-political, geo-cultural, anthropological, material, metaphysical and nomadic, discourses in the theorising of Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti, TJ Demos, Karen Barad, Rick

Dolphijn, Irit Rogoff, Trin T. Minh-Ha, Anselm Franke, Bruno Latour, Suely Rolnik, Mika Hannula, Claire Bishop, Edward Soja, Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist.

- To contextualise these installations in relation to works by artists such as Teresa Margolles, Zachary Formwalt, Ni Haifeng, Hito Steyerl, Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson; to selected international major exhibitions in global locations by curators such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Jelle Bouwhuis, Cosmin Costinas and Inti Querrero and to viewers in different contexts, from local residents and workers. Furthermore in relation to dialogues with invited professionals from the field: artist and curator Ma Yongfeng, artist and curator Alessandro Rolandi, theorist and curator Mika Hannula, artist Megumi Shimizu (Qingshui Huimei) and artist Yu Bogong and with artist Huang Xiaopeng which took place during a presentation at Huangbianzhan Research Institute, Times Museum in Guangzhou (December 2015) and to a conversation with Mr Wang, a resident of Ma Quan Ying village, Beijing (see Appendix C for a list of these conversations).

In this research, I am concerned with exploring globalisation via locality. Embedding this research in the chosen sites and the potential of intersubjective approach are at the core of this research. Moreover, the process of writing echoes the research and production processes of the sites.<sup>6</sup> I need to specify here that while this thesis is concerned with binaries and dualities, and is located in China, it should not be understood as an exhaustive and comparative study between Western and Eastern philosophy or religion. Nor should it be considered an investigation into cultural difference as an anthropological subject. Rather, this research led to me to approach these questions through transversality inherent in new materialism by reflecting cultural theory without privileging, for example, matter over mind or culture over nature and as embedded in local knowledge. Furthermore, I was led to consider the energy-matter relationship, how energy might be a vital generative force, cosmic flow or Qi.<sup>7</sup> It led me to explore how energy might be operative in, or rather pass through, for example, in metabolic,

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the site of my production and research being China, this thesis contains many references to cultural practices and local histories. Whilst I will give short accounts of the relevance of the cultural practices to the research and my artwork, I do not go exhaustively into the long and complicated history of China. Rather, I assume the reader to have a general knowledge of its politics and history. However, as this thesis is about subjectivities, I feel the need to clarify the common and deeply rooted assumptions or misunderstandings regarding lack of individual criticality and excessive obedience among the Chinese. It is true that East Asia has an old political culture emphasising the collective and official conformity – Confucianism. Equally though you have the very individualist strands of Taoism and later Buddhism. East Asian cultures are simply not binary, which does not reduce person capability to e.g. criticism. These misguided views might be required by reflecting the culture of fear of living under dictatorship, e.g. Mao or currently Xi Jinping, even if the latter's is arguably less threatening. This, again, is something totally different to lacking the above-mentioned basic human characteristics (individual criticality and disobedience). One cannot place a whole nation of people separately to others.

<sup>7</sup> In Chinese philosophy, Qi is the 'vital flow of energy', the ethereal psychophysical energy of which everything in the universe is composed, closely parallel to new materialist use of the concept of cosmic energy.

spectral, spiritual, consumerist, utilitarian, psychophysical and (fossil) capitalist bodies or realms. Thus, I explore monist perspectives and through this, aim to challenge the (dualist) transcendental and humanist traditions which have dominated (Western) cultural theory until today (Dolphijn; Tuin v/d 2012, p. 85). More specifically, in my works, I explore posthuman theory through vital materialism. According to Braidotti "... vitalist materialism is a concept that helps us make sense of that external dimension, which in fact enfolds within the subject as the internalised score of cosmic vibration" (Braidotti 2013, p. 56). Further, she describes it as "the roar which lies on the other side of the urbane, civilised veneer that allows for bound identities and efficient social interaction is the Spinozist<sup>8</sup> indicator of the raw cosmic energy that underscores the making of civilisations, societies and their subjects" ... (ibid.). Following this, I challenge the human position as exceptional (in relation to its others) and explore relationality, inclusivity and generative powers of subjects and objects (human and non-human) in relation to current theorising and local knowledge. Through this, I started exploring body and mind, materiality and meaning as entanglements, and the experience of the latter in my artworks. I began to question how the material dimensions of an artwork might generate a discursive form (and vice versa). To be clear, this research is an account embedded in one artist's works and process-orientated nomadic practice and it reflects cultural theory. It is a reflexive inquiry through intertwined processes, encounters, exhibitions and theorisation in relation to a set of research questions. During this process-orientated approach, subjects such as matter-energy, spirituality and vital materialism emerged through dialogues and negotiation with and on the sites and through the materiality of the latter.

As a mode of writing, I shift and merge the grounded theoretical concepts and thoughts in dialogue with issues emerging from the processes of materialisation of the artworks. As such, this thesis entails a process of 'push and pull' – exploratory and speculative non-hierarchical shifting between these theoretical, emotional, material, energy and metaphysical (otherworldly, spiritual and/or spectral) reflections through different streams and fields of knowledge (including local knowledge, both academic and non-academic, and non-human knowledge).

I evaluate my installations in dialogic relation to other artists' works, via reflexive conversations with local residents, viewers in different contexts and local and internationally operating artists and theorists, various curatorial practices and theoretical accounts, as well as my process-orientated and political nomadic position as an artist and researcher, and as a resident of Caochangdi village in Beijing.

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to the Spinozist dictum that the mind is always already an idea of the body, while the body is the object of the mind (Dolphijn;Tuin v/d 2014, p. 91).

I explore ways of engaging both the work and the audience with marginalised, injured sites of the world in order to challenge the hierarchy between the self and other. Crucial to my research is that recent theoretical accounts have altered our perception of the self and the other by transporting the subject out of essentialist identity politics and into visions of selves as inter-relational forces (Gilles Deleuze 1987; Rosi Braidotti 2004). Both of the above theorists see the subject not as substance, but rather as a process of negotiation “between material and semiotic conditions that affect one’s embodied, situated self” (Braidotti 2002, p. 79). In other words, as a relational force that is capable of variations of intensities and interconnections: ‘becomings’ – thus, a generative way of being a function of confluences rather than resemblances and assemblages (Deleuze 1987). This includes an understanding of the interconnections between the self and a multitude of other forces, and thereby locates the constitution of the subject in interrelation with others. I aim to explore how this might transform oppositional and dual relationships between subjects and objects (human and non/in-human) into more inclusive ones.

In this context, it is important to mention that material or matter in this thesis is not thought of as solid and stable. Rather, it is always conceptualised and perceived in relation to temporality, therefore as transformative and self-organising.

This means that through ongoing change, matter does not allow representation “to take a root” (Dolphijn; Tuin v/d 2014, p. 117). This is why matter or materiality might be understood (I hope) in and through this research as one of my co-actors and co-subjectivities; as active agent and as a performative part in my installations.

This is also where my project meets new materialism. I aim to explore the potential of ‘shared’ representationalism (Dolphijn; Tuin v/d 2014, p. 117).

Julia Kristeva’s (1980) theory of abjection is concerned with the subject’s relation to the repulsive and the marginalised. Kristeva defines the abject as an individual’s psychological state of crisis, as self-disgust and disgust towards others. The abject is neither subject nor object, but a threat to the subject’s sense of identity, something experienced as repulsive which should be violently expelled. As such, abjection might not be so much the physically repulsive as the individual’s relationship to that which disturbs identity, social and/or theological order, a border or ‘safeguard’ for one’s culture (Kristeva 1980, pp. 3-7). Thus, Kristeva’s abjection could be understood as pointing towards the disintegration of identity. However, there is no mutual relationship between subject and object but rather a danger of annihilation of the ego. Looking into abjection through, for example, a hygienic procedure, it could still be seen as an evident way of highlighting difference as a process of exclusion in the relationship between the self and the other. In order to

contest these positions, I explore possibilities that might challenge Kristeva's psychoanalytical and hyper-individualised notion of abjection. This is achieved by situating it in more extended fields of relations and in anthropological frameworks, including the concepts of becoming (Deleuze 1987) and animism<sup>9</sup> (Anselm Franke 2012), and using local knowledge. Building on this, I am particularly interested in the subject-object relationship as mediation (as proposed in animism), and as an inclusive relationship. By reflecting on the aforementioned sites and their materiality<sup>10</sup>, I investigate whether a more expansive account might allow for a new kind of agency of abjection outside particular limitations of Western/Eurocentric positioning. I ask how the materiality and hybridity of the sites, unexpected encounters with them and an intersubjective approach might integrate the processes of abjection with the notion of 'becoming'. Might this be a way to transform the oppositional relationship between the Self and the Other?<sup>11</sup> I examine how this relationship might be transformed into an affinity in which the other is not caught in a dual relation but included through ethical and material inquiry. Thus, abjection becomes a critical frame of reference through which I develop methodical tools to investigate possibilities for new agency (of the processes of abjection). In my installations and in my reflective account, I examine these processes not only as a psychophysical and psychoanalytical (and thus still disintegrated) process, but as an inter-relational process: a generative agency, which merges with becomings and, therefore, operates as inclusive - for example an ethical, metaphysical and/or material relationship between differences (human and non/in-human).

As opposed to common ethnographic methodologies of research, which reflect on the systems of meaning of life in particular cultural groups, my methods of research could be described as 'working and being with'. Thus, instead of the 'other' I encounter (at the sites), the context of my research is the interdependent systems of co-existence of the sites and the artistic reconfigurations of these relationships proposed in the completed artworks. Thus, in my installations, I aim to propose inclusive relations between differences, between multiple co-actors, be they human or non-human. My research is situated in relation to the above-mentioned paradigm shifts, to my political position of nomadic artist and to the diversity of socio-cultural (power) structures, rituals, materials, the otherworldly and geo-locations within globalisation. It is in opposition to the anthropocentric and, as such, I

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<sup>9</sup> The term 'animism' is an anthropological construct used to define world views in which non-human entities possess spiritual essence.

<sup>10</sup> Mariality as incorporation of the material and the immaterial, e.g. the imaginary and otherworldly potential and properties of objects and subjects (human, non-human and in-human).

<sup>11</sup> Here I speak about the Lacanian Other/other, in the context of the Symbolic Order. When referring to Lacanian construction in this thesis I will use his algebraic symbolism. When not, I will use the small other (petite a), referring to the exterior, the radically different (which is not solely defined by the realm of speech or in relation to the human subject in general); or I will define the specific context when necessary.

turn away empathetically from the postmodern concept of homogenising universalism. Therefore, in this study, the concept of the universe should be understood in these terms.

My interest in Asia and Asian art/artists arose from my frustration with the domination of Eurocentric views and culturally specific presentation of art; in particular, in relation to inherently psychoanalytical mechanisms in which alterities are always seen in relation to and through the 'I' (in Western culture). For me, these visions and constructions were too limiting, particularly regarding the potential of materials.<sup>12</sup> I felt the need and urgency to disrupt these anthropocentric and essentialist subjectification in relation to otherness and objecthood. My first visit to Beijing (2007) was actually a stopover on my way to Mongolia for a working period. I was intrigued by the dynamic city of Beijing, especially by the expressive, performative time loop it presents. Rapid urbanisation (and globalisation) generates huge social-economic gaps which often create situations where it seems like many centuries and Chinese multiculturalism<sup>13</sup> collide. People are living their lives adapting to each of their (new) surroundings, continuously connecting the past, the present and the future. Since then (while spending the rest of the year mainly in Amsterdam), I have spent my winters in Beijing; thus, I am a semi-permanent resident of one of these villages (Caochangdi). As well as these consistent locations, I also regularly participate in residence programmes in places such as, in recent years, Iceland, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Mongolia and my native Finland. In so doing, I have taken up the status of a nomadic artist. This position has made me reflect on a multitude of artistic positions and subjectivities, and the complexity of the artistic process itself and its relation to spatio-temporality. More specifically, this research project sets out to critically to question concepts of nomadic subjectivity as a critical approach to the impact of globalisation, the international circulation of knowledge and human relationship with others. Through this political position (nomadism), I aim to investigate the tensions that emerge from globalised contemporaneity and the different subjectivities and artistic practices constructing cartographies reflecting on the accelerated condition of the contemporary world. I began to question how extensive lived experience, the incorporation of local knowledge and different levels of collaboration might have the potentiality to

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<sup>12</sup> For example, during my master's studies (2005-2007) in Holland, I made a couple of works with human hair. To my great frustration and amazement, a significant number of the comments on these works were contextualised and interlinked, because of this bodily material outside the body, with World War II, to Nazi Germany and the shaving of the Jewish people in the concentration camps, even though I pointed out the fact that I did not know whether there was (or wasn't) Jewish hair in these installations. This one-sided and extremely limited contextualisation (of the human hair and the abject) led me to look into works of Asian artists. I discovered related, non-anthropocentric thinking in their works, particularly in relation to materials and issues of the body (human and non-human).

<sup>13</sup> China is often considered a homogenous nation, but officially it is composed of about 56 ethnic groups (55 minorities plus the dominant Han). However, some of the ethnic groups, as classified by the PRC government, contain within themselves diverse groups of people.



be incorporated in (and generate) artworks, and to question how to communicate these processes to the viewer. I intend to question how my nomadic position might oppose the flexible subjectivities produced by modes of art practice which reflect global sites and conditions without grounded and sensible readings of, or lived experience on, the actual sites. Nomadic art processes that are managed via, for example, knowledge and (cultural) cartographies gathered through mass media or scientific processes or data,<sup>14</sup> Or in places such as archives and institutional collections, thus, on distance? There is urgent need to investigate the potentiality of emphatic proximity, through localities and embedded and embodied perspectives particularly in artworks that reflect globalisation and are to be presented on international stage. This process might be slow (and rather unspectacular at times), but embedding in locality might allow for the following connections rather than (super)imposing data upon them. Also, the outcome, the artwork, might demand more imagination from the viewer. However, I aim to challenge discourses that are based on the regulated language used by the mass media as this might filter out all that allow for other possible perspectives since they might solely echo back the author's understanding. Moreover, I am concerned to investigate references and meanings that are not solely represented (and validated) by the politics of recognition through counter narratives, by (empty) signifiers in or from polarising locations. I am concerned to produce bodies of research and art projects which do not reduce life to serve cultural capitalism or to be easily consumed as a "recognisable territory under the illusion of silencing the turbulence provoked by the Other's existence" (Rolnik 2011, p. 5). It is my intention to research a multi-voiced and socially mediated dialogue expressing different subject positions with research and analysis grounded in attention to local subjectivities and conditions, and from there on, from grounded positions, to reflect on globalisation and the international conditions of artistic production, reception and display. I examine how to reconfigure cartographies, through empathy and intersubjectivity, which might express the cohesive (even when disruptive) connectivity of their constitutive elements. Reflecting on this, and acting from this urgency, in my installations, I aim to examine the relationships between the self and the other as affinity in which alterity, even the turbulent other, is not caught in a dual and oppositional relationship of exclusion. Rather, I explore how this other might be Included, not by assimilation but as inter-relational difference and as inclusive. How might my installations reflect conditions of more ethical, material and otherworldly relations between the human and its others (and among humans)? Might this

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<sup>14</sup> I do not say here that these methods are always fundamentally wrong. There are many critical artist practices that utilise these methods ethically and emphatically.

expose the concept of otherness as an outdated system of alienation while expressing an affirmative position towards differences?

This thesis is divided into two sections. In Section 1, I discuss my multisensory installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), which consists of objects, Taoist prayer pillows (Chinese brocade, felt, sand, soil, tea and leaves), photographs (installation of eight photos 65x90 cm and series of four photos 45x60 cm), handwritten documents, audio and odour. In Section 2, I discuss *Coalworks*, the four-channel HD video installation with soundscape *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and the installation of objects (hand-rolled coal balls and billiard cues covered with coal dust) *Blackballing* (2013). The reason I include both these works in one section is that each developed from the same context, or rather from a confrontation with an object; an encounter with a row of small, singular hand-rolled balls of coal on a street in Caochangdi village. Through these installations I explore globalisation in relation to processes of marginalisation and through the environment, and how these might be interrelated to capitalism, and through their potential to reconfigure relationships between subjects and objects and material and meaning.

Section 1 starts with a reflexive account of the context from which my installations emerged: daily life, materiality and rituals related to burials in semi-industrial suburban migrant worker villages in Beijing. I start by contextualising their marginality in relation to the notion of the 'Third Space' (Homi Bhabha 2004) or 'Thirdspace' (Edward Soja 1996). But as this concept has evolved in relation to the concept of nation and contexts of postcolonial discourse, I move on to globalisation and the current conditions in China- how accelerated economic integration into the late-capitalist world system and the electronic mass media and communication industry coincide with the physical construction and deconstruction of Chinese cities (Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist 1997). Furthermore, I embed these systems of globalisation in the shifting realities of the villages. Through processual accounts, in which theory and practice are in a dialogic relationship, and in relation to my political position as a nomadic artist, I examine how a random encounter with a graveyard in the ditch of a highway close to the centre of Beijing, developed into the multisensory installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), through which I explore my research questions. I investigate how marginality became the vehicle for critical inquiry into tension between differentiation and equality, operating, within my research, not in opposition to modern centres of this world but entangled with them – the other side of the same coin. I lead the reader through the processes, the struggles and confrontations inherent in nomadic positioning; in being emotionally, materially and ethically tangled and embedded in this marginalised site (and condition of globalisation).

I elaborate on how, for instance, uncleanliness and other considerations such as the unofficial status, the poverty, the marginalised position and the materiality of these sites (the village graveyards) led me to examine them using as a frame of reference the notion of abjection. I explore how encounters with these sites and their materiality challenged me to question the possibility of new kinds of agencies for the processes of abjection, outside of its particularly limited Eurocentric (and Christian) definitions. I ask how might the process of abjection function as a catalyst or allegory in order to explore larger cultural, social or global phenomena and understand what this shift might entail or bring forward. I position Freudian/Lacanian theorising on the formation of the subject (the basis for understanding Kristeva's construction of abjection) in relation to Deleuze, who situates the formation of the subject in a more enabling relation to others. In this section, I pose the question of whether more interrelated, fluid potential for change and transformation might be opened up by integrating the processes of abjection with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming'. I do this by examining the processes of abjection not as psychoanalytical, but as an inter-relational process that might generate spaces of becoming. I do this in order to allow for more interrelated agency for processes of abjection, as a potential, mutual and relational affect (rather than a Eurocentric psychoanalytical construction) and to allow for ethical and/or material relationships between differences (human and non/in-human).

In this section, I reflect on the research processes and the decision-making in the production processes of *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12). I elaborate on how approaching marginal conditions through research and analysis grounded in attention to local subjectivities, knowledge and conditions necessitated collaboration with the 'Honourable Elderly Neighbour',<sup>15</sup> a retired taxi driver. I examine the ethical implications of this collaboration, such as translation, questions of authorship and cultural customs. I expand on how the methods we developed together enabled the production of multi-voiced and socially mediated dialogue expressing different subject positions in the installation; how the oral historical accounts and personal narratives collected from the villages (by the Honourable Elderly Neighbour) turned into a spoken third person audio narrative, and how this adaptive use of free-indirect discourse (Deleuze 1989) might generate multiple subject positions. Here the intention is to shift hierarchies in the production processes themselves but also between viewer (and author) and the artwork. I explore how distance from the original storyteller might simultaneously create nearness, as the viewer is not confronted by the individual ego of the storyteller but by multiple subjectivities (who all feel the urgency to tell the story further).

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<sup>15</sup> He wished to remain anonymous.

Encounters and materialities on the sites led me to consider concepts of animism in relation to local knowledge and vital materialism and furthermore in reference to the theorising of Anselm Franke and Bruno Latour (Franke 2013). Animism opposes the modernist subject-object dichotomy as well as the separation of mind and body. In order to explore more open perspectives, to break through the dualism, I also refer briefly to the aforementioned Spinozist dictum of the mind always being an idea of the body. In order to reflect further on modes through which to reconfigure the subject and object dichotomy, and the entanglement of materiality and meaning (and how there might not be separation between these two) and how this tangles with the ethical, I refer to Karen Barad (in Dolphijn:Tuin v/d 2014). More specifically to her science-orientated agential realism and performative metaphysics, the concept “intra-action” through which the universe could be understood “as agential intra-activity in its becoming” (Barad 2003, p. 818).

In conjunction with these theories, I investigate how the materialities and processes expressed with/in the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) might expose spiritual animistic mediation and middle ground as active and embedded agents. How might the installation propose an interlinking between the imaginative, for example, the transcendental and the supernatural and the material, between the physical and the conceptual form? I question how might meaning and materiality, performed by artworks, become entangled without becoming some kind of representation of the inhuman that is imposed on life. How might this produce inclusive, intersubjective and ethical relations between subjects and objects (such as the human and its others), between the author, the viewer, the artwork and between contexts – the site of origin and the space of exhibition? I question how these entanglements might propagate beyond their sites and places of origin, across cultural geographies and into other realms. I investigate what this might mean for their relationship with spatiality and temporality.

I analyse the materials utilised in the installation and explore their potential to reference the nature-culture (and life-death) continuum. I experiment with materials that reference the graveyards and the cultural practices relating to honouring the dead and to burials – sand, soil, ash, tea, herbs and tree bark. I explore the specificity of these materials and how they might be understood as iterative materialisation. I utilise these materials to fill objects, which are prayer pillows that I designed to reflect the shapes and sizes of tombstones on the graveyard and which, through this entanglement of meaning of materiality, might generate new rituals. I reflect on my use of photographs of the gravestones on sites and how they mirror the objects in the installation. How might this expand and interlink the context to reflect the political and the spiritual in conjunction with the secular? I discuss how the faint scent of these

materials, lingering in the exhibition space, was used to stimulate an olfactory experience and (emancipated) affects. I examine how the prayer pillows suggest or invite the audience to perform a ritual of prayer (or simply to use the pillows as a lounge) within the installation, intending to shift the relationship between the viewer and the artwork from passive consumer to activated, de-centred and (hopefully) ethically and materially implicated participant. Through the installation, I propose that these bodies (pure and impure) and their interrelations might challenge not only the exclusive relationship between the self and the other but the whole anthropocentric system of thought. This would open up relationships between different realms, between the subject and object, between people and things and beings, between material, natural and conceptual fluidities, as energy flow between and across bodies (human and non/in-human) through which the relationship between material and meaning takes form and might expose potential (for example, the spectral to address and embody ethicality and inclusivity). Furthermore, I explore how *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) might express a more mutual relationship between differences, for instance, the marginalised village and the viewer in exhibitions in different locations, utilising specific cultural details (and their abjections) without echoing their supposed parallels and counter narratives located in the minds of audiences in different parts of the world.

Parallel to the processual accounts, I analyse and probe my nomadic position through the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), in reflexive accounts relating to different subjectivities and art practices that might reflect the tensions emerging from globalised contemporaneity. I do this through considering works by various artists working with these questions Teresa Margolles's installation *Aire* (2004), is examined in order to reflect on the political potential of materiality; Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson's installation *Bosbolobosboco 6* (2014) is studied in relation to multivocality. I refer to the practice of Hito Steyerl to reflect on virtual nomadism and Zachary Formwalt's video *A Projective Geometry* (2012), in order to highlight criticality in the artist's position with regard to the international circulation of knowledge.

I examine the processes of abjection by situating it as a parallel notion to contamination, pollution and infectious diseases. I ask how 'becoming contaminated' might operate within the paradigms of pollution and disease being inseparable from their physical and spatial logics of propagation or their virulence. For example, a disease might move from person to person, village to village or country to country as a contamination and pollution by penetrating our lungs and skin, ground water or fertile soil, through the wind, through mass production processes, exploitation of our natural resources and global trades. I reference these reflections in my consideration of Hong Kong

based art space Para-Site's major exhibition *A Journal of the Plague Year. Fear, ghosts, rebels. SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong story* (2013).

From here, I move on to an evaluation of the reception of *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) through analytical reflections which are conducted in dialogue with viewers at various exhibitions. I also conduct informal conversations, based on their viewing of the work, with practitioners and theorists, my co-actors from the field – artist and curator Ma Yongfeng, artist and curator Alessandro Rolandi, theorist and curator Mika Hannula, artist Megumi Shimizu (Qingshui Huimei) and artist Yu Bogong. In these conversations and encounters, I discuss, for example, how the viewers in exhibitions in Asia, in the first instance, approached the installation via spirituality and materiality; and how the materiality also aroused vivid animistic experiences of the presence of spirits in the exhibition space through which the experience of abjection was connected to otherworldly and cultural practices (whereas in the West, it was experienced at first as political, or based on fear of contagion and dirt avoidance). The reconfigured and flexible relationship between, for example, the graves and the ash, the grounded materiality and media of the installation, might have enabled shifts away from and resistance to common Western psychoanalytical references. I wish to consider how abjection in relation to the otherworldly might transcend Freudian psychoanalytical understanding of the subject-object relationship through which encounters with spirits embedded in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) might be seen rather than as animistic mediations, as abject hallucinations or as belonging to horror films or nightmares. How might the otherworldly not allow to be contained in antinomies of secularity: rational arguments versus acts of faith; public activity versus private beliefs; socio-political citizenship versus spiritual rituals; material versus spiritual (Braidotti 2014, pp. 301-302)? Through *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) and the entanglement of materials and meanings generated, I am exploring how spirituality and secularity might be united. How might they be linked as energy flows and becomings to allow for monistic process ontology; how might the installation allow for and perform the post-secular; how to intertwine the secular and the spiritual as an approach to (residual) spirituality?

Through these conversations, I also address the local/global dichotomy and how essentialist positioning does not necessarily reflect on or take into account speculative turns in current discourses, especially regarding the potential of materiality. I address how it might be necessary to relate to the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) via affirmative positioning towards a monistic philosophy and worldviews, in order to allow for transformative relationships (between the viewer and the artwork, subjects and objects, and locations). Moreover, I reflect on how the current state of our planet, as a result of capitalist exploitation of its resources (and of each

other), has enabled/forced us humans to rethink our position within the earth and planetary systems in terms of more fluid connections – between the human and the non-human, between subjects and objects. I explore how the installation might allow a more active and mutually constitutive agency for other-than-human forces and subjects. I argue that in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), the Western conception, the arbitrary, privileged and anthropocentric categorisation between nature and culture, and life and death, is challenged. The installation explores how more inclusive, interdependent and contingent relations between subjects and objects might be generated. I also address how the concept of the 'other', rather than operating as a constituting element of the subject, might become an outdated system of alienation. Through this research these issues also become entangled with concepts of resistance and how they might, rather than being pointed towards another, be turned towards ourselves. This alternative or transformed positioning of resistance has become one of the concerns of this research.

Furthermore, I situate processes of abjection in a conjunction between the legal and the spatial. With such a coupling, I am able to reflect on the contrasts between the dynamics of processes of marginalisation, global economics and their ethical affects. This shifts the focus from the marginalised, individual person (the abjected) or from the psychoanalytical, personalised relationship with the marginal (the object) to the process of marginalisation itself, as a process of abjection. Through processual presentation and the different subjectivity engendered, I propose that the *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) installation might transform the binaries and dual relations between the self (the viewer or author) and the other (human or non-human) to a more inclusive and interdependent political, ethical and material relationship between differences. I propose that the process of abjection might become imperceptible of other processes – how it might transcend its psychoanalytical hyper-individualised understanding and sacralised Christian notions and morality.

Section 2 discusses *Coalworks*: the four-channel HD video installation *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and the installation of objects, hand-rolled coal balls and billiard cues *Blackballing* (2013). In Section 2, I move on from sites directly related to death, and transformation of the human body (and the implication of the human subject, albeit spectral), to sites of fossil fuel – coal. I do this in order to examine different forms of material, transformative relations and energy flows and to extend this research to questions of environmentality, (spectres of) coal production and use and fossil capitalism in general; to explore how global capitalism might be reflected through its effect on the Earth's system, and globalisation as "commercialization of planet Earth in all its forms, through a series of inter-related modes of appropriation" (Braidotti

2013, p. 7). I shift contexts in order to challenge further the oppositional modernist Western positioning between subjects and objects. Furthermore, I move on from still images to moving ones. I lose the use of spoken language as a method, address non-human subjectivities in their own voice and return to questions of materiality to reflect on the entanglement of material and meaning.

In Section 2, I start with a reflexive account of the context from which my installations *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) emerged. I elaborate on how my encounter with the row of hand-rolled coal balls at a street corner in the village unfolded in two installations. These coal balls are made out of the deposits – the dust and crumbs – of coal piles in villages and compounds. They are used for heating, and cooking. The encounter with these objects was significant to this research. They seemed to me to contain within them a multitude of interrelations and potential becomings: for example, the paradox that the very thing that keeps one alive (by providing warmth and enabling cooking) is actually killing one (as a pollutant). I continue to situate abjection in parallel with processes like contamination, pollution and mass production alongside exploitation of our natural resources and each other, global trades of fossil capitalism, and religious and spiritual blasphemy. I continue exploring how material and meaning might mingle, in the creative process of producing as well as in the final artworks.

I situate these *Coalworks* in a context that is not directed and dissected by the global debate on climate change through inequalities in contribution to global warming based on division by nation-states and their geolocation (e.g. being from the global north or the global south, or China being a major coal producer and polluter). Rather, I aim to reflect on inequalities between consumers: on the one hand the villager's and on the other the global consumer who consumes the products co-produced with the labour of the villager. My question is how might this ethical and political nomadic position become a vehicle to implicate the viewer of the artwork (as well as the author)? How might this thereby transform the oppositional relationships between the self and the other to focus on questions of mutuality; how might mutuality, as defined before, not be a sentiment or reciprocal relationship but rather operate as inclusive, interdependent and intersubjective?

I offer a reflective account of the research processes and the decision-making in the production processes of *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) – how I, reflecting on the act of rolling the coal balls (by mixing of differences, coal, soil and water), started to build interconnections by filming and reconfiguring spatial, social-political, environmental and material conditions emerging from and related to this raw material. I elaborate on daily life in the coal-invested village, mixing imagery of coal-invested landscapes, cultural details and the ubiquitous and transversal potential of coal. I move from the villages to other



contexts and sites such as a forgotten Buddhist temple along the Yangtze river in Chongqing. I explore how, for example, imagery of a ritual of incense burning, the cleaning of the holy vessels and burning rubbish in them (an act outside institutionalised ritualising), can coexist with that of the action of rolling coal balls and the effects and generative interrelations these reconfigurations might produce. I examine how these interrelations might not assign meaning to the coal ball or the sites and places I filmed but how they rather might act as a catalyst for the intensity of ruptures involved in the shifts and movements between different contexts; how they might generate spaces of becoming. I consider how they might generate interdependent and inclusive relationships pointing towards possible futures.

Furthermore, I continue examining how marginality became a vehicle for critical inquiry into tension between differentiation and equality, and reflect on the non-unitary view of the subject in Braidotti's nomadism (2006).

I reflect briefly on the concept of the Anthropocene, acknowledging the inherent anthropocentrism and other ramifications around the naming of this current epoch, e.g. potential socio-economic inequalities (Demos 2013). Rather than focus on the level of involvement (in the destruction), I aim to examine ecological crises through looking at the potential of a possible future "bond of vulnerability" (Braidotti 2013). I question whether such a bond, as expressed in artworks, might generate means or methods for us humans, for new propositions of subjectivity and for a new way of being. Might this shared vulnerability enable a "compassionate acknowledgement of our common need to negotiate thresholds on sustainability" (Braidotti 2014, p. 319), more conscious understanding that we (human and non-human) are all suffering the consequences of human actions of destruction? I examine whether an artwork might express potential for processes of inclusion (of the other), not by totalising and assimilating but operating as an ethical and material agency. Could this bond be extended to include non-humans? And in such a bond of the human and non/in-human, would there be space for difference? How might I avoid reducing us all to the same?

I reflect on my choice to use multiple video channels; how this was based on the aim to build possible systems of dependency between the fragments themselves and between different contexts (e.g. the sites of origin and the site of exhibitions). I elaborate how this decision came forth from the environmental acoustics, sounds of the environments I filmed and the effect they had when played together. In this work, *Rituals to Mutations* (2013), I shift from my previous use of the human voice and modified form of free indirect discourse in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) to the use of soundscapes. I give an analytical account of my decision to allow the bodies of differences and subjectivities (non-human) in the videos to have their own voice for dynamic and spatial expression. I reflect on this decision in relation

to the westernisation of the world alongside global economic regimes, anthropocentrism and Christianity, with its division between the mind and the body and emphasis on human language. Would losing the emphasis on human spoken language and utilising non-human subjectivity and expressivity allow for a more inclusive criticality? Could the use of non-human voices open up a way to explore the processes of abjection as situated in extended fields of relations, outside the domain of psychoanalysis (as in Kristeva 1980) and the inherent relation to the Christian God? I investigate the use of soundscapes in order to explore the possibility of creating a less epistemological and more affective (cinematic) experience for the viewer, which in turn might enable shifts in the relationship between subjects and objects. I explore whether this (virtual) materiality might be experienced as an animistic mediation and/or as a body unfolding inside from the outside. In this way, I am attempting to challenge dualisms and polarisations while maintaining a relation to the natural and ontological, stratified fields of organization<sup>16</sup> and the particularity of the materiality, and aim to offer alternative, collective modes of being or experience. That is to say, I aim to reflect on the materialities, processes and movements of processes of transformation without losing ontology and a certain relation to the sites and contexts of origin (e.g. the burning of rubbish in the Holy Furnace in the Buddhist temple in Chongqing), rather than focusing on the potential outcome. Might it be possible to consider these contingent processes more (inter)relationally, without situating them as the sole coextensive of human essentialism? Could it be possible, in this installation, to generate intersubjectivity performed by the non-human with and through their own voices, their ontologies and affects?

I contextualise *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) in relation to concepts of subjectivity in film theory. I reflect on ethics and explore the potential of using the isolated image of another (framed faceless body, the hands rolling the coal balls). I question how and whether such a frame, a close-up of a faceless body in relation to other bodies, in the other videos - such as that of coal, water or a factory pipe - might propagate inclusion. Might it be possible to do this without reduction of the other to sameness and without projecting an objectifying, exploitative gaze upon the other? Might the facelessness become an interface and create transformative and intersubjective relations among the human and between the human and non-human, between the viewer and the artwork? By situating *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) in the context of the accelerated globalisation of the 21st century, its affects and the potential of post-human understanding of our world, I question modes of subjectivity of being-with: intersubjectivity that is not necessarily limited to

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<sup>16</sup> Stratified seen not without any ontology or categorised relationship. Not as linguistic effect but as ontological demonstration.

inter-human exchange. I question why the other should be positioned solely to satisfy the subject's (viewer or author) inner psychological ambitions; why we still consider this rationale as relevant. Hasn't the other been subjected to hierarchization, being the object of colonialism, exclusion, marginalisation and alienation? Hasn't s/he/it been pierced by the gaze of the individual (Western) subject long enough? Hasn't the concept 'other' become an outdated and anthropocentric strategy of exclusion, one that is embedded in linear understanding of time and disallows continuums such as nature-culture and life-death? Reflecting further on temporality, I analyse my decision to use a different duration for the video on each of four channels (and thus allow for their self-organisation rather than rigid editing). I consider how these generative and processual sound images might allow for spaces of becoming and reflect on the self-organising potential of materials, and on matter/material as radically immanent and continuingly transformative. In the videos, I explore how this transformativity of the non-human is intertwined with the inhuman and how this might create a continuous and ever-changing narrative through which processes such as abjection might merge with possible becomings and conditions of interdependency, and generate potential futures.

From my reflective account of *Rituals to Mutations* (2013), I develop the research processes and the decision-making in the production processes of *Blackballing* (2013). I move from the virtual to the material, as I felt at this stage that a video installation alone could not fully explore the coal ball as a (raw) material nor as a medium. I start by analysing coal's potential to reference different realms, for example, energy flows, global economics and politics, death, environmental pollution and global warming, and the different material qualities of fossil as plant matter. I examine how the apparently most immutable, dead material, a fossil, might have spectral and active agency through the involvement of human use.

I give a descriptive account of how the coal ball's shape and materiality, made me think about ball games in relation to the global economy, triggering the concept for the installation *Blackballing* (2013). I reflect on physical labour as the labourer selling her/his own body and energy and how capitalism might level out differences by reducing bodies to carriers of vital information, which get invested with financial value and capitalised (Braidotti 2013, pp. 117). Rather than reflecting on this inhuman potential of self-organisation, I aim to explore this relationship more affectively and physically. As opposed to this capitalist mode of classification, I explore modes of resistance as a place for difference. I reflect on the ethical implications of involving the labour/labourer in the production of the artwork, and how this involvement became part of its critical content and context. I consider *Blackballing* (2013) alongside Santiago Sierra's *133 persons paid to have*

*their hair dyed blonde* (2001), in order to de-centre the discourse of marginalisation. Further, I explore the difference in the critical contexts of these two works: difference and exclusion in terms of identity politics (Sierra) and mutuality in terms of material and ethical inclusion (my installation), and in terms of shared responsibility.

Furthermore, I analyse the production processes of the installation, in which I collaborated with the worker Zhao Shifu, and the ethical implications of this co-workmanship.

I discuss *Blackballing* (2013) through reflecting the self-organising potential of material (coal). I reflect on the form of the ball that might be seen as an allegory of planet Earth turning around its axis, of the cycle of life and of the coal-covered billiard cues. Thus, by utilising their material and metaphorical potential, I explore how they might unite the material and meaning. How might these meaning-loaded objects of raw material unite with a web of inhuman relations such as capitalism, marginality and games, and, through this, inclusion.

In parallel with the processual accounts and analytical introduction to the installations and the aesthetic processes of their making – *Blackballing* (2013) and *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) – I probe my nomadic position and the installations in reference to different subjectivities. Specifically, this involves a reference to a conversation with my neighbour Mr Wang and Ni Haifeng's *Para-Productions* (2008) and elaborating on the different ways these installations (Ni's and mine) might have the potential to allow meaning to propagate beyond its context of origin, uniting terms and realms that might, in themselves, be perceived as opposed.

From here, I move to an evaluation of the reception of *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) via analytical reflections. I also continue referencing some of my dialogue with co-actors from the field: artist and curator Alessandro Rolandi, and theorist and curator Mika Hannula. I refer to informal conversations with viewers at various exhibitions and to a discussion with Huang Xiaopeng which took place during a presentation in Huangbian Station Research Centre of the Times Museum in Guangzhou. Via these reflections, I question the effect of these installations and their potential to generate and change the terms of a debate on the conditions of mutuality. I elaborate on how the round shape of the coal ball, the circular movement of rolling it and the ubiquitous nature of the material coal (as, for example, a part of the human body) generated contexts of inclusion to/of the socially and politically marginalised conditions they were connected to in the artworks. Furthermore, I consider how the installations produced effects such as aggression and anger towards the social conditions of the villagers and the practice of burning rubbish in the Holy Furnace. I argue that these reactions are not that directly connected to different cultural contexts but that they vary

by location. I propose that the investment in time (by the viewer and the author) might transform these initial reactions into a productive quality; after longer viewing, the initial response of othering, anger and aggression turned to affirmation (of relations of interdependency). This viewing experience might enable inclusion of differences and allow more space for independent thinking, for instance in relation to Western regimes of signifiers and homogenising universality. I claim that this investment in economically non-productive time could also be seen as resistance to the current consumerist, neo-liberal world with its mechanisms of capital, spectacle and marketing, and its commercialisation of the planet Earth.

I argue that the marginality, and the abjections performed by these installations (*One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013)), might become transformative entities, bodies that through assembling with other bodies, function as interconnected, inter-relational ethical agencies in an expanded political and material consciousness. I consider how the installations might challenge binaries and dualisms – how they might propose possibilities for active shifts between subjects and objects, and between the artwork, author, viewer and context(s). I propose that they do this not by reducing the other to sameness, or to homogenising ideas of universality, but by implicating, ethically, mentally and materially, the viewer, as an interrelated difference.

I assert that these three artworks might generate a mode of resistance that operates inclusively and outside institutionalised domains. I propose that the processes of resistance, in this sense, might not solely address the other but simultaneously turn towards ourselves.

I conclude that these processes, actively performed by the installations, could be described as processes of sharing, rather than owning: sharing of landscape, land, country and the universe, on a human, non/in-human, geological and planetary scale. They are intended to generate embodied and embedded perspectives in which meaning, material and ethical become entangled and in which alterities might find their place. The installations might create a collective body composed of expanding relations of interdependency and, through this, conditions for more ethical, material and otherworldly (e.g. spiritual and spectral) relations between the human(s) and its others.

## Section 1. On Approaching the Installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)

### 1.1. Encounters on the site

At the end of March 2011, I was wandering along the old airport road, which functions as a side road off one of the major highways to the main airport, in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing. I was on my way from one urban village<sup>17</sup> to another. Suddenly, I stumbled over something and fell flat on my face. When I got up, I realised that what I had stumbled on was a small sand hill – a tomb. I had come across a strange landscape. Between the polluted trees of a planted forest next to the village gate, and the ditch of the highway, there were many tombs and gravestones alongside village rubbish. There they were: the leftovers of the ancestors and the leftovers of a village, located in what I shall refer as ‘in-between’ space; between the urban and the countryside, between civilisation, or the developed world, and that which had been hopelessly left behind. I could imagine such conditions in remote countryside areas of China but not close to the centre of Beijing.<sup>18</sup>

Around the village gate, between the ancient houses and the newer makeshift buildings, the homes and the businesses, I could see the villagers going about their day, selling vegetables in the small market, negotiating prices, fixing cars and caring for their children. The village dogs were lurking around. On the other side of me, on the highway, cars rolled on slowly in traffic jams, honking their horns, and further, above the graveyard, the airport shuttle, raised on a viaduct interconnecting the city with the terminals and the rest of the world. I was at an intersection of times, cultures and socio-economic structures and the otherworldly. It was like I was looping in time and between different spaces, realms and locations at once. Through this experience, I became interested in the relationship between these potentially incommensurable elements and the contradiction of the synchronous existence of death and life, spirituality and politics, which they present. This site offered me possibilities in which to pursue the research questions for this PhD: what kind of confrontation and dialogue might this marginalised micro-world open-up critically outside the global mainstream discourse based on mass media, the systems of the spectacle? Would it be possible to transform the relationship between the self (the viewer or author) and the other (human and non/in-human)? With this PhD project, it is my intention to open an affinity in which the other (human and non/in-human) might not be caught in dual

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<sup>17</sup> By the term ‘urban village’, I refer to the shantytown-like settlements in the semi-industrial outskirts of Beijing. These villages are often built in and around existing, sometimes ancient villages and grow organically due the inflow of new migrant workers from all over the Chinese countryside. Curiously, many of these villages also host large artist communities.

<sup>18</sup> Approx. 20 km from Tiananmen Square in the centre of Beijing.

and oppositional relations of exclusion, but might be included. Therefore, this research is an inquiry in the state of lives, with a demand for equality. I believe that the role of the artist is to imagine and speculate about potential futures. In order to achieve this, I find discursive practices and multivocality an essential part of art-making. Furthermore, the artist may try to create platforms to allow people to think about things in a different way, through which the encounter with the artwork which might enable the viewer to think of other possibilities or questions.



Images 1 and 2. Site of encounter/ outside Qianweikou village  
The airport shuttle train rails in the background. 2012, Beijing (image 65x90 cm, part of the installation)







Images 3 and 4. Street view: Caochangdi urban village, Beijing 2014<sup>19</sup>



Street view Caochangdi urban village, Beijing 2014.

<sup>19</sup> All images (unless specified otherwise) by Kristiina Koskentola



Image 5 Entrance to my studio compound, 'Iowa', Caochangdi, 2014



Image 6 Village life Dongba township, Beijing 2014.

My first concerns, in view of the conditions I encountered at the site, were sanitary because of the repulsive idea of dead bodies being buried in such close proximity to the village. The thought that dead bodies could penetrate the living bodies of the villagers, for example, through their water supply, was truly horrid, especially as the graves seemed to be relatively new.<sup>20</sup> I was wondering whether some epidemic had swept away major parts of the village population very recently. It was only at a later stage that I was informed that I had encountered the graves just after the Tomb Sweeping Day, an annual festival for honouring the dead, which involves cleaning the graves and the graveyard. My falling over the grave and landing in this strange condition made me think of abjection as a process of being placed outside the organisational principles, such as those of social and religious orders, and how these are or could be transformed by incidents and random intrusions and occurrences. Processes of abjection (for instance, hygienic procedures) could be seen as a clear way of highlighting differences between the self and the other. Yet, simultaneously, they are difficult relations through which to consider the other as inclusive and inter-relational parts of the worlds we inhabit. But how structured are these principles in relation to processes such as contagion, illness and decay? It is my aim to examine how the experience of artwork might have agency in transforming these kinds of relations by offering potential to reconfigure relationships between subjects and objects. The uncleanness of the marginalised position and the materiality of these village graveyard sites lead me to examine them via the frame of reference of the human psycho/physical notion of abjection. I started to wonder how to approach and develop artwork in which the abject might reflect the human side of this site, in relation to economics and globalisation which, through its accelerated economics, (co-)enables such pollution and devastation. Becoming contaminated operates within the paradigms of pollution and disease and their physical and spatial logics of propagation, or their virulence. For example, a disease might move from person to person or from village to village, country to country, as contamination and pollution, by penetrating our lungs and skin, our ground water, fertile soil, through the wind, through mass production processes, exploitation of our natural resources and global trades.

In the context of the village graveyard, I thought, the processes of abjection could be linked to social and spiritual processes of sanitation. I started to consider how these processes of abjection could act as a catalyst for ruptures in the production of visibility/invisibility or processes of marginalisation. How might the processes of abjection then merge with other

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<sup>20</sup> No, this is not solely a 'Western' reaction, but rather a reaction of the urban person, one not used to such conditions. Burying bodies inside the city limits and on unauthorised ground and locations has been illegal in Beijing (as well as in other Chinese cities) since the 60s. Nowadays, burying un-cremated bodies is also forbidden all over the country.

processes in relation to and with extended cultural geography? These are phenomena such as: 1) pollution; 2) cultural practices such as bringing food to the graves; 3) human and non-human processes of transformation such as decay or change of properties by burning; and 4) exploitation in and exclusion through the global capitalist system.

Through these reflections, I decided to begin a project building on this encounter. Rather than conducting a socio-political inquiry alone, my aim was to address the conditions on the site via the transformative potential of its materiality and related rituals, in order to examine how they might shift the relationship between the human and its others, and between contexts. This research project asks if it could be possible to transform the Eurocentric ideas of the relationship between the Self and the Other (in the sense of Lacan)<sup>21</sup> to a more open kind of intersubjectivity. Hence, I aim to question how it might possibly move to one of affinity, in which the other (the human or non-human) is not caught in a dual and oppositional relation of radical exclusion but might be included. How might my project generate systems of relations that allow the meaning to move beyond the site and traverse different realms? How could my artwork propagate and reflect on these transformations, and articulate these further in order to allow or challenge the viewer, both at local and global locations, to engage with the same process of being included, ethically and/or materially?

I stood at the graveyard for a long time, mesmerised by the tombs and their surroundings. The feeling of discomfort and despair gradually dissolved and a strange sensation of harmony and acceptance of human failure started to emerge. Yet this harmony was accompanied with mixed feelings of urgency for acts and gestures of resistance; not so much towards the abject condition on the site as such but towards the whole process of marginalisation. I started to contemplate the scenery around me through its materiality. In my thoughts, the sand, the leaves, the rubbish and filth, the smog, the smoke of the coal burning and the ceremonial paper cuts and stones on top of the tombs started to intermingle with their chaotic surroundings – human and non-human activity. In my mind, I started to weave the organic life cycles in new interconnections with the inorganic, between the human and the non-human and new possible transformations. At first these thoughts led me away from socio, identity and geopolitical considerations but later they started to interconnect these realms with the physical world of the body but also with the otherworldly. How might I produce artworks to connect political practices with monistic philosophy, with its rejection of dualisms, especially with regard to the nature/culture continuum and the self-organising force of living matter?

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<sup>21</sup> When I refer specifically to Lacanian Other in this thesis, I will use the capital O, referring to radical Other.



And how might these reconfigurations simultaneously reflect criticality (of human conditions) and inclusivity (of the other, human and non-human)?

I was contemplating my own position at and in relation to this site: as a human being and an inter-relational force in the cosmos, as foreigner, not as the ultimate other but as a difference, as an artist and as a researcher, as a Western subject. I was thinking about my position as a human being, as an artist, as a researcher and as a nomadic subject in relation to the encounter with this site. In this regard, these thoughts led me to Braidotti's theorising, which is particularly relevant in order to challenge the Eurocentric binary logic of identity and otherness and the inherent rational universality in which otherness is the negative and inferior counterpart. According to Braidotti (2006), re-grounding the subject in materiality embedded in a sense of ethical responsibility towards the environment's inhabitants would be an alternative to global processes, proliferation of quantified differences and not a qualitative de-centring of hyper-individualism. Thus, I was interested in inclusive relationships between, or rather among, the self and the other (human and non-human). These Braidotti propositions led me to question how, utilising my position as a nomadic artist and my privilege of living in this marginalised place under globalisation, to reflect on these shifts. I wished to produce a series of artworks that might explore the possibilities for incorporating materials, processes and spatialities, and offer the potential to reconfigure relations between subjects and objects; and through my artistic process/practice to investigate. Through my nomadic position I aimed to consider, the encounter between author, viewer, artwork and context(s) and the human subject's relationship to the materiality of my artworks.

Rosi Braidotti identifies nomadism as "progression toward deconstructing identity: molecularization of the self" and "a process of being in constant translation and a successive adaption to different cultural realities" (Braidotti 2011, p. 45). Nomadism entails a constant state of being 'in-process' or 'becoming', an attempt to "explore and legitimate political agency, while taking as historical evidence the decline of metaphysically fixed, steady identities" (Braidotti 2004, p. 5). So, nomadic subjectivity is a process with multiple variables as opposed to ontological or epistemological givens; while the subject is physiologically embedded in the corporeal materiality of the self, the nomadic subject is an in-between, simultaneously interconnecting and transcending external and internal influences and affects. Braidotti argues that nomadic becomings are the sustainable shifts or changes undergone by nomadic subjects in their active resistance against being subsumed in the commodification of their own diversity (Braidotti 2006, p. 29). Thus, nomadic subjectivity is a position that affirms difference within collectivity and, as such, could be seen as resisting simultaneously both hyper-individualism and assimilation of difference. In practice, this means

that in order to work within these parameters, an artist like me must be grounded in deliberate agency and lived experience. In my view, this means that one has to feel, smell, taste, negotiate and debate, understand and misunderstand, and be understood and misunderstood, even hurt and be hurt, in order to approach the productive forces of difference. An artist needs to be open to risk and encounters of (self)-exposure and friction between values, and allow oneself to lose control and these forms of exposure to propagate transformation, articulating this further in the artworks in order to allow the viewer to engage with the same process. In relation to my aims for this research, this would be a desirable position from which to examine how an artwork might have an agency in transforming these relationships and generating shifts between the author, viewer, artwork, context(s) and the subject's relationship to the materiality.

So there I stood, on the graveyard in the ditch of the highway, 'molecularising' myself, adapting, reflecting on myself outside all concepts of ultimate alterities and structures of exclusion. I did so not as a hyper-individualised Western subject nor via hyper-politicising of identity politics of nation-states (Demos 2013), which would solely confirm oppositional relationships between the self and the other, but as a human being, a being among other beings, emotionally, materially and ethically tangled with and embedded in this marginalised site and worldwide globalisation.<sup>22</sup>

Gilles Deleuze (1987) claims that the potentiality of the body unfolds in a state of nomadism and constant transformation. Thus, in order to approach the productive forces of these bodies and differences, I would have to allow myself to lose control, and negotiate and debate with myself and with my environment (human and non-human) and become one difference within it an embodiment that means being simultaneously grounded and flowing and to 'molecularise' myself in order to transcend the variables that might be understood as constituting identity (race, species, nationality, social status).

In order to investigate these potentials for knowledge production through artworks, I would also have to try to keep this loss of control and embodied position as a vital part of my research project. I question the possibility of production of multi-vocal and collective, post-identitarian subjectivity through and with artworks. These would not only transform the relationship between the self and the other but also question what this transformation might entail in relation to subjectivity itself. What kinds of union might this produce?

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<sup>22</sup> Regarding globalisation, I refer and direct the viewer's attention towards the global dynamics and powers which are operative at the sites: whilst these sites could be described as marginalised, they are simultaneously an integral part of a larger network; the key events, characteristics and situations they are composed of are inter-relational and dynamic.

## 1.2. Moulding the methods

In order to organise and realise this graveyard project, and to embed my research project in the shifting realities of this marginalised site, I returned to Beijing in November 2011. To understand more of and to contextualise the dynamics of marginalisation and the position of these villages in a constant condition between exploitation and survival, I researched the notion of a third space. This is the relationship between “incommensurable elements’ (Homi Bhabha 2004) and a transcendent concept that is constantly expanding to include “an-Other ... that is radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge” (Edward Soja 1996, p. 61). Thus, how might this enable the contestation and renegotiation of boundaries and cultural identity, moving beyond dualisms, and allow their potential to inform my research subversively (Idem)? But due to accelerated globalisation, the theory of the third space has evolved beyond its origin as the concept of nation and contexts of postcolonial discourse; the marginalised spaces are not solely generated and operative in relation to the powers of the coloniser. Besides this, Beijing is not influenced by colonialism as such; rather, colonialism, or its spectre, entered Beijing through globalisation. In China, the accelerated economic integration into the late-capitalist world system and the electronic mass media and communication industry coincide with the physical construction and deconstruction of Chinese cities. Moreover, these accelerated processes happen without major political change in China. While modernisation in Asian countries is considered a “process of re-enforcement of national identities, sometimes even religious and ideological identities”, globalisation in these cities is “ironically accompanied by general deconstruction and disintegration of values and established cultural modes ...” (Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist 1997, p. 2). These physiological and psychological instabilities are a direct result of globalisation and the volatile conditions of urbanisation, which create vulnerable marginalised places (like the sites of my research) and equally vulnerable residents. In China, urbanisation goes hand in hand, not only with the accelerated rise of hypermodern city centres, their alienating psycho-geography and impressive buildings, but also with the counterparts of these realities, such as the migrant workers who are physically building these megacities while being legally, economically and socially marginalised.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The PRC household registration system, the hukou, controls, for instance, movement of people between urban and rural areas. Due to this, the migrant worker cannot officially register in the city he is working in and has no access to healthcare or proper housing. For example, children of migrant workers are not allowed to enrol in school in the city where their parents work and must live with their grandparents or other relatives, in order to attend school in their home town; due to this, families are torn apart.

In my research and its physical outcomes, marginality operates as a vehicle for critical inquiry into the tensions between differentiation and equality and into the basic conditions of being human. Suely Rolnik (2011, p. 7) describes the conditions of marginality by stating: “on the micro political domain, things are distinguished not by their social or economic class belonging, nor by the place they occupy in any hierarchy of knowledges, but by the forces that invest them”. In my research, marginality becomes a tactic to intervene in dominant theoretical, historical and interpretative models; to problematise and re-evaluate classical ethnographic narratives and their implications for authorial omniscience, and for completeness and integration based on social construction linked to dominant political orders (and/or to those who benefit from them). Marginal(ised) places and spaces of globalisation, such as Chinese villages, allowed me to investigate different physical processes systems and organisations of material. Here I need to mention that I do not do this in naïve praise of universality characteristic of postmodernism. While the privilege of being part of the community of the village enables me to conduct this research in empathetic proximity and dialogue, such privilege can never fully be looked upon without taking notice of those who are less privileged and of the politics within the current neo-liberal world of control, repression, and inequality (Demos 2013). However, I also do not see them as spaces that stand in opposition to the modern centres of this world, but rather as the other side of the same ‘coin’. These villages offered the potentiality to critically analyse the contemporary world through my artworks, beyond the direct dominance of the techno-scientific sphere, in human scale and proximity. Further, they enabled me to deconstruct not only the complexities of the concept of abjection, but also those of resistance. I examine possibilities to turn these processes from pointing towards another to a process that bites into the skin of us all, regardless of where we are.

Onsite, I soon learned that research into this site would be complicated to organise because, even though some of these villages are to be found on most maps, they are mainly ‘illegal’, falling outside urban development and city planning. The villages have been expanding, growing by themselves for the last hundred years; and when the soil got too polluted for farming, they became the shanty towns of Beijing, home to the poor and the many migrant workers from all over China. Most of these villages have been or will soon be demolished in order to make room for large-scale apartment buildings and newly built suburbs. Because of the semi-legal status of these villages (and of most of their inhabitants), I realised that my research would have to be based solely on oral histories and personal accounts. Yet, this would enable me to address multiple subjectivities.

However, collecting this information would be difficult; as a foreigner, I could not simply go to the villages and ask questions. Even my assistant could not



do this, since the generation and lifestyle gap between my assistant and the villagers would make the latter shy and, therefore, less likely to talk to her either. On the other hand, precisely this difficulty was the key to my research, as it allowed me to study the struggles embedded in it.

So, I would need to find an older Beijinger, a local, not someone who has migrated to the area from the countryside, but someone who is grounded in this environment and would be able to build trust; and above all, willing to go to the villages and to make inquiries on the sensitive subject of the graveyard. This was no easy task: the older generation is often very difficult to engage in activities that might be seen as transgressive by the Ruling Party (and what is considered transgressive by that body is never transparent but always variable). There are also major taboos in Chinese culture regarding death; people do not want to visit graveyards unless absolutely necessary, as it is believed to bring bad luck.

As always in China, everything goes via '*guanxi*' (the vital flow of personalised apparatus through which one can navigate the sometimes rather complex social and business-related networks in China),<sup>24</sup> rather than Yellow Pages or business records. I talked to everybody I knew about my project, to colleagues and friends and their families. Finally, a staff member of the Three Shadows Photography Center (I am *guanxi* of the Three Shadows as I have exhibited and lectured there) proposed talking to her neighbour who is a Beijinger. This neighbour was a retired taxi driver (he used to drive a 'black cab' – an illegal taxi) and, therefore, knew all the villages and many people in them very well.

We set up a meeting at the home of the staff member and I introduced my plan (via a translator) to the taxi driver. The Honourable Elderly Neighbour<sup>25</sup> agreed to the plan. He would be happy to work with me (as he lives next to the Three Shadows and, therefore, belongs to my *guanxi*) and was also curious to learn more about the history of his neighbourhood, about which he (along with all other residents) had no clear idea. We started discussing the details. He would not be able to go to the villages with a questionnaire on paper and a pen or a recorder; such devices would make the villagers shut down, for the old suspicion towards all things official is deeply rooted.

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<sup>24</sup> *Guanxi* refers to the basic dynamics of networks of friends, families, business associates, etc., on which an individual can call when something needs to be done, and which can be activated on behalf of another. *Guanxi* dynamic is a central idea in Chinese society. *Guanxi* is not restricted to one location or community, but can be expanded via the individual, their families, friends and associates all over China and globally. But *guanxi* is never a one-way street. It is necessary for almost everything: for artists, for example, for the (reliable) production of artworks like photographic prints or sculptures, or printing publications. For me, in my practical work and research, *guanxi* is the source of local knowledge and unexpected encounters, which turned out to be the key elements for this project.

<sup>25</sup> I asked the neighbour if he wished to / allowed me to mention his name as co-writer and researcher. However, while smiling and pleased, he wished to remain anonymous. Chinese people of his generation are cautious about possible trouble with the authorities and do not mention their name, ever, if they can avoid it. I will refer to him throughout the text, as well as in all communications such as the exhibition credits, as 'the Honourable Elderly Neighbour' (with which he was, again, pleased) and sometimes by his previous occupation 'taxi driver'.

Together with the Honourable Elderly Neighbour, I set up a method that would allow us to work and be with each other and communicate without sharing a common language.<sup>26</sup> I would develop a short set of questions that the taxi driver would be able to remember by heart, in order to keep the content open for the unexpected, and I also told the man that I would be interested in all personal and communal stories and histories he might know or hear. He would then visit the sites in question and engage in dialogue with the residents. After his visit, he would write these accounts down in Chinese for translation into English. Translation is, by nature, about being faithful to a text, and in this sense it can be linked to ideas of justice. The ethical 'burden' here, shared by the translator and me, as author, was a constant negotiation between the spirit of the stories and the letter of the text. We would discuss each story and incident carefully, in order to find the right balance, a voice that was respectfully faithful to the text, yet avoided too much naturalising ethnocentrism. Through this kind of in-depth communication and lived and shared experience, my intention was to develop methods which might open up new avenues to investigate the possibilities of shifting the hierarchy of power relations governing the making of meaning in art production. This in-depth communication would allow me to examine the importance and effect of local knowledge (including non-human) and lived experience in art production for my PhD research project and through my research into global art locations in general. My intention was to challenge the meta-framing of discourses and the echo chamber effects inherent to the global circulation of knowledge and art production based solely on, for instance, virtual ontologies and data. I intended to obscure generalised demarcations of knowledge produced by the mass media and their effect on subjects/subjectivity (including my own) by close, empathetic and multi-vocal attention to the conditions and subjectivities of the sites I was investigating. Would this mean, to a certain extent, that I, as an artist and researcher, have to let go of the content of my project and allow the taxi driver to fill the gaps in order even be able to approach my subject matter? As the core of my research might be specifically in this generated in-between space, between my subjectivity and the subjectivity of the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and in the subjectivity co-produced by him and all those (human and non/in-human) he encounters in the villages. In this transformation in hierarchy, the intersubjectivity and the generative powers of difference they entail are vital for my research. How might this affect my artworks and what kind of intersubjective relations might

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<sup>26</sup> Communication without a common language is a challenge, naturally, but Chinese people are usually very patient and expressive, and they have great sense of humour, due to which all forms of non-verbal communication – such as hand movements, facial expressions and small drawings – are easy. Actually, the absence of common language in itself opens up new understanding and approaches towards my work and research. In a way, it sensitises one to other kinds of experience, within human communication but also in the relation with the environment, and forces one to reconsider dichotomies such as the relationship between nature and culture.

it evoke between them and their audiences? And how might this reflect temporality, non-linear time?

### 1.3. Methods in practice

The Honourable Elderly Neighbour and I drove to the first of the two villages I had chosen for this project. We arrived at the location or the place where the recently demolished Zhang Wan Feng village had once stood and where the graveyard still was, surrounded by the rubble of the demolition. I left the Honourable Elderly Neighbour at the place that had been the village gate to conduct his research and watched him disappear among the rubble, then returned to my village Caochangdi close by. I truly felt that that I had no authority whatsoever, and that this was the right way to do this. He would be my eyes and ears, the prospect of which made me both excited and anxious. How would this work out? What kind of information would he gather and how would the translation process go? Would I be able to use and translate this information in a way that might reveal something, that was useful for an artwork and would open up a transformative, interconnective negotiation? Could this method of working produce something that is generative in relation to my aim of examining possibilities for transformative and intersubjective relations (human, non-human and in-human)?

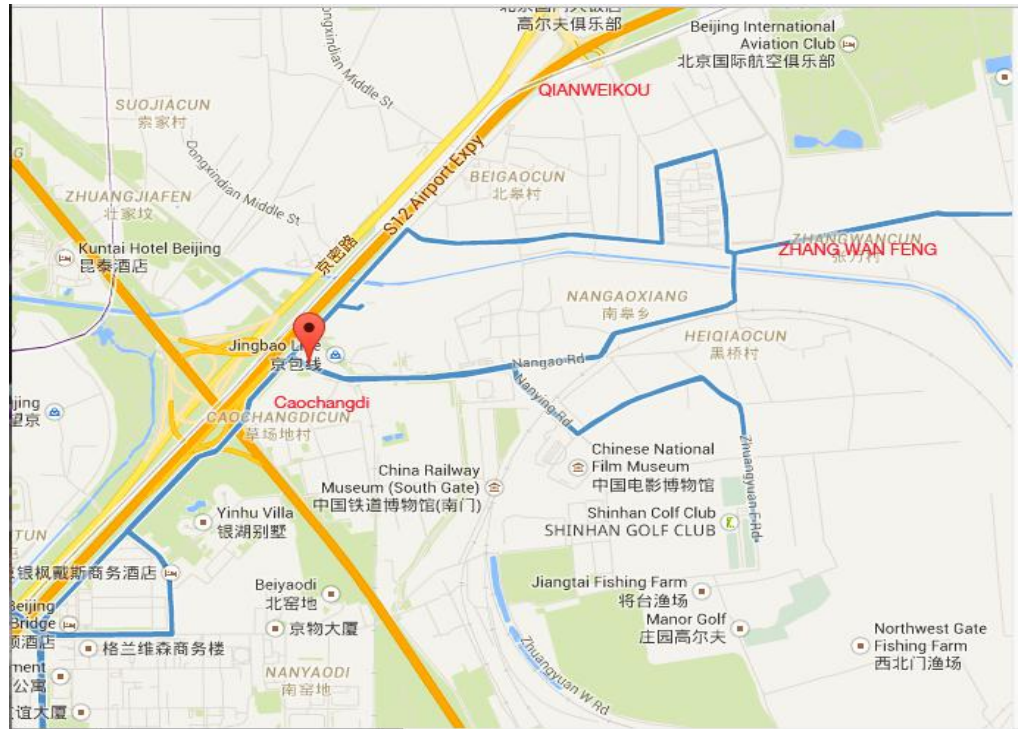


Image 7. Detail of map of the villages in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing

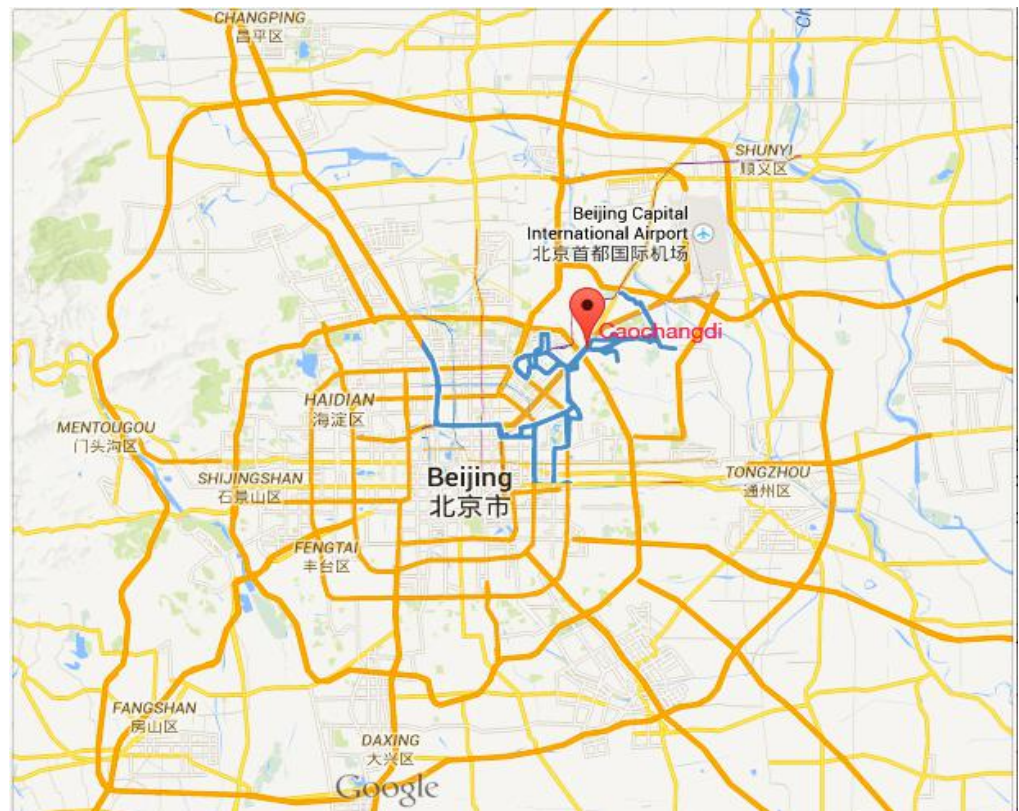


Image 8. Map showing the village Caochangdi (where I live) in Beijing

The same routine was repeated a few days later for the second location chosen, the still existing village of Qianweikou, where I initially encountered the graves.

Meanwhile, I had continued photographing and filming the selected village graveyards. By experimenting with different approaches, relatively soon I lost interest in the moving images; in my view, they seemed to have some kind of 'road movie quality'. Something fleeting, while it might serve the purpose of reflecting on the movement of the graves disappearing and being demolished, did not quite present the emotional intensity of the sites. These moving images somehow created more distance than nearness; their ethnography seemed to depersonalise the individual graves. A fixed photographic image would enable me to capture the condition, the moment, and allow the viewer to study them more carefully as they were, motionless and monumental, in contrast to their ever-changing environment. So, I decided to concentrate on developing a series of photographs.

As I had encountered the graveyards just after the tomb sweeping day, I did research on this old custom of honouring the ancestors. During this festival, villagers clean the graves and bring offerings, such as food, drink, various 'gadgets' and objects such as mobile phones, cars, computers and animals made of cardboard, as offerings to the spirits. They also burn ghost money.<sup>27</sup> According to tradition, when the offerings made to the spirits of the deceased are set on fire, their properties transfer to the afterworld, where they can, through this transformation of materiality, be used by the spirits. Hence, this ritual functions as a kind of post-mortem or spectral gift economy, which might unite the living and the dead societies, the material and the immaterial. I thought about the encounters which took place during my time documenting the graveyards, particularly one incident which made a deep impression on me. An old man drove by on a bicycle and stopped to tell me that when photographing graves, one must say the Buddhist prayer, a mantra, *a mi tuo fo* "may Buddha protect, may Buddha be praised", three times to soothe the spirits around the graves lest they grow angry and start to haunt me or bring me bad luck. I asked my assistant, who was translating this conversation, if she thought that the old man was offended by my photographing the graves of his ancestors and intruding in his life. According to my assistant he was, on the one hand, simply making conversation and, on the other hand, genuinely worried about my wellbeing. This encounter opened up yet another way of examining the subject-object relationship. I started to examine possibilities for transformation of this subject-object relationship as a process as life-death continuum, in order to examine the relationship between the self and the

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<sup>27</sup> Burning of Chinese paper money also known as ghost money (either fake money with printed design on it, gold or silver-coloured metallic paper or rice paper with cut patterns, letters or emblems on it) is an ancient tradition that goes back thousands of years and one that is retained to this day when honouring one's ancestors.

other including the non-human, spectral other. In secular thought, the political and social might be understood as rational and the spiritual as irrational. How to transform this exclusive binary to a generative and inclusive potential, in order to allow for knowledge production through and with these 'irrational' agents? In other words, how to emancipate the otherworldly, the material and the object, allowing them their subjectivities and powers of expression? How might I be able to address spiritual and spectral, the otherworldly, more affectively, grounded in the materiality of site and lived experience, and building on local knowledge and spiritual traditions? How might I be able to include the respective viewer in the artwork in exhibitions at global locations? And what kinds of union between the secular and the spiritual might this produce?

Led by these vital and material questions, I aim to challenge the psychoanalytical and Eurocentric understanding of abjection (Kristeva 1980), in order to further explore the embodied, embedded and inter-relational subject through affect.

The notion of abjection, as extensively theorised by Kristeva, can be understood as a psychological mechanism necessary for the formation, autonomy and coherence of the individual subject. Following the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, Kristeva locates the psychic construction of the human body and the developing of processes of abjection at the very beginning of childhood, and she connects them with the prohibition of incest and the separation of the mother's body. She delineates a child's inevitable journey from the pre-oedipal to the oedipal phase, in order to become a speaking subject in the symbolic order. The subject is grounded in a primary loss through separation from the mother. Kristeva describes the repulsion or disgust necessary for the subject to constitute itself and to enter into the symbolic order of language. The role of abjection theory and the relation between the acquisition of language, the child's separation from the mother and mapping of the body are later signified in social orders, taboos, rejections and sin within psycho-symbolic economies. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva attempts to locate, or rather modify, Western psychoanalytic practices to 'fit', as it were, within different signifying practices and cultural contexts. Her account of abjection connects, for example, Old Testament taboos with psychoanalysis and then directly transforms or projects this Western logic to inform other specific cultural practices. While she is talking about the role of processes of abjection within other cultural practices, her primary concern is hyper-individualised and her analysis does not extend to an exploration of the role that abjection might play in lived social processes or in the construction and demarcation of social and cultural identities. In this PhD project, I ask with to what extent we can approach different cultural or collective identities of any kind informed by Kristeva's logic of abjection, with

its psychological mechanisms. Wouldn't this be simply an action of superimposing the understanding of one symbolic order on another? Wouldn't such an act (as in Kristeva) simply turn into a form of psychoanalytic colonialism? Is it even possible to make such an attempt to project Western psychoanalytical models regarding a culture thousands of years old, such as the Chinese, without reference to larger socio-cultural and political contexts and monistic metaphysics, as Kristeva does? Could this notion then be de-colonised? And de-territorialised? Would a more expansive account of abjection allow for a new kind of agency outside of the particularly limited notions of Eurocentric (and Christian) positioning?

In my research, the site and my encounter with it might transform the processes of abjection to something more inter-relational. Here there was a shift in the processes of abjection to a more extended field of relations and one from the binaries between the Self and Other to interrelation between the human and its others. I am keen to explore how the process of abjection might function as a catalyst or as an allegory in relation to, and in order to explore, interdependency (with the non/in-human) and affect. How might this concept be transformed through more affective entanglement with ever-shifting relations and perpetual becomings that possess a more intimate, inter-relational relationship with the world? Might this position the notion of abjection as a sort of pedagogical experience or an affect and process through which we might negotiate our relationality, or as a tool for cultural theory (rather than psychoanalytical notion? Might processes of abjection become imperceptible to other processes in the artworks? And if so, would we still be able to use the term 'abjection'? What possibilities for transformative and intersubjective relations between the human and the non-human can be developed in my artworks using this conceptual approach?

In their attack on Freud, Deleuze and Guattari (1972) problematise Freudian psychoanalytic theory and its focus on the individual ego, without trying to explain the ego's social or political emergence. According to Deleuze, Western thought is built on the prohibition of incest and the renouncing of desire towards the mother's body in order to become social. Therefore, the crucial difference between Freudian psychoanalytic theorising (such as abjection) and Deleuze is that, for the latter, life does not begin from a bounded individual or the ego but from flows of energy, connections, production and complex differentiations. It has no original, closed state. The individual is the culmination of a history and investments leading to the singular body that is relational and temporal.

Life and desire do not begin with bounded organisms. There is a flow of life or genetic material, the intense germinal 'influx', which passes through and across bodies. In its original and differential power, life is not organised



into bodies: bodies are formed from investments or from the active and ongoing interactions of becomings

Claire Colebrook (2002, pp. 141-142).

So, contrary to the Freudian-Lacanian structure disruptions, such as abjection, which is traced back to the relationship between the mother and the child and the acquisition of language, Deleuze argues that disruptions begin collectively and impersonally – they travel from person to person and do not emerge from a personalised family structure. According to Deleuze and Guattari, any body or thing is the outcome of processes of connections. For Deleuze (1990), the body is flexible, physical and abstract at the same time; his theory of the body unfolds in his theory of becoming. The potentiality of the body unfolds in a state of nomadism and constant transformation; the body is an assemblage of genetic material, ideas, powers of acting and a relation to other bodies. “A nomadic vision of the body defines it as multi-functional and complex, as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings” (Braidotti 2012, p. 33).

Reflecting on this, I am eager to consider how Deleuzian concepts of nomadism and becoming might be a useful lens through which to rethink the bodily roots of subjectivity and through this, to transform the processes of abjection and its individualised psychoanalytical structure of privilege, in order to allow for more affective and interconnected positioning. This, in turn, might allow subjectivity and potential for knowledge production for the non-human, including the spectral. Such was the case on this site, on the graveyard with this old cyclist, where the rituals of worship, the devastation of society and the human subject merge with the non-human subjects and bodies of materiality, such as the polluted soil of the graveyards and the ritualistic objects placed on top of the graves. These grounded acts and conditions simultaneously reflect the de-sacralisation of the individual human above all others and the ontological relationality of the human subject and the social complexity and interdependency of our societies. “The body or the embodiment of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological” (Braidotti 2015, p. 33). Thus, these bodies, pure and impure, and their interrelations led me to seek to challenge not just the Western Subject and the inherent exclusive positioning of the Self as the opposite of the Other, but the whole anthropocentric system of thought opening up the relationship between different realms, subject and object, and people and things.

This led me to consider concepts of animism so as to examine the possibilities of transforming the subject-object relationship.

According to classical Western anthropology, modern and premodern societies are separated by a Great Divide. This concept positions civilisation as the opposite of the primitive and archaic and has been a powerful concept in the modern imagination. It states that only the moderns can differentiate between that which, according to them, belongs to the material and to nature and what are their cultural symbolic meanings or social relations. Modern science and its empirical evidence influenced and powerfully transformed all fields. Yet it was the Christian church that banned the practice of all natural medicine that was approaching healing practices through holistic and non-secular views, thus without empirical evidence (e.g. astral and spiritual influences, and doctors' and patients' personal beliefs). According to the Christian church, these views were pagan, superstitious and backward. In contemporary China, through the westernisation of the world, an interesting reverse process is in place: people and the medical field in general are abandoning traditional medicine in favour of the modern Western one. Yet, many institutions and individual patients use a combination of the two.

According to Anselm Franke:

The most radical antitype to the modern Western worldview (in which dualistic conception is built on a categorical separation of subject and object) is to be found in animism. The division between nature and culture, in which objects, nature, or the entire cosmos, are perceived of as being alive, and thus quasi subjectified.

Franke 2012, p. 8.

Following Bruno Latour, Franke maintains that the division of nature and culture, and the subsequent purification of the two domains of subjects on the one side and things on the other, is only possible by a repression of the middle ground, the mediation that connects subjects with objects in multiple forms. (Latour, cited in Franke 2012, pp. 8-38). In connective mediation, everything happens in the middle, in a space that does not exist as it has no physical place. Objectification, the purification of the domains of subjects and things, of life and non-life, is made possible by suppressing mediation. As Latour says "the moderns had in common a hatred of intermediaries and a desire for an immediate world, emptied of its mediators" (Latour 1991, cited in Franke 2010, p. 26).

As opposed to animistic (and monistic) understanding of the subject-object relationship, Freud (1959, p. 64) saw such mediations as irrational, as hysterical and neurotic disturbances. According to Lacan, this relationship challenges the ego to try to control it permanently. Building on this, Kristeva (1980) describes abjection, the temporary dilution of the border between

subject and object, as being “on the edge of non-existence and hallucination of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (Kristeva 1980, p. 2). These privileged anthropocentric, individualised and negative claims deny any potential for mutual, inclusive and generative relationships between subject and objects. They overlook any vital or speculative potentials, indeed, the very subjectivity of objects and materiality.

In order to pursue this project, I now need to reflect on these mediators and middle ground. This is important as it will help me to explore whether I (through my artworks) might be able to challenge both the psychological theorising of abjection and the understanding of the constancy of subjective perception within the subject-object relationship as a condition of identity. I do this by situating it in relation to animism as a theory and as embedded in my encounters on the sites, their materiality and in localised knowledge, and by situating transcendentalism and materiality outside dualist perspectives to monist ones.

Anselm Franke states:

It is impossible to get past this impasse of contemporary politics without reclaiming autonomy on a different plane, where autonomy resides in the ability to articulate relationships and collectivity. And this requires us to “pass through” animism, in order to reclaim the imaginary – without the qualifier “merely” – as the space of the political, where we can break open the logic of division, not in order to realise the utopian image of a “borderless world”, but to bring into politics the very border-matrix which was categorically hidden, as the unquestioned background condition against which modern politics unfolded.

#### Notes on the exhibition *Animism* Franke, 2012

Franke (2012) claims that “today, ‘animism’ is no longer what is repressed in order to install in its place a Cartesian regime of disciplinary identification and boundary policing. Rather than providing the justification for colonial subjugation, today it provides the justification for the biopolitical mobilisation of the individual psyche”. He reflects on animism’s potential to animate the in-human through the individual psyche. In this way, he situates it in relation to the psychoanalytical theorising of Freud and the releasing of the subconscious, as long as the subconscious is “contained by the self-management of individuals and prevented from becoming a collective affair”. In his account, Franke (2012) sets out animism as a framework through which we may subjectify, and thus animate, our world and milieus, in order to naturalise the regime and undo the alienation that capitalist modernity has imposed on us.

In reflecting on this, rather than exploring the potential of ‘animating’ an image that might, in the end, reflect spectres of colonialism and individualised capitalism, I am interested in how animistic spirituality might be embedded in the materiality of the sites.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, it is important to the reader to note that this research is not reflecting the premodern age of the West. However, I am not solely interested in the anthropological animism I encountered through this research project or on the sites: what I am concerned with is entangling this anthropological animism by questioning how things other than those of human origin might have agency that is embedded and/or entangled with residual spirituality. I aim to explore how to reflect on this in artworks, in order to allow for displacement of anthropocentrism. I aim to examine how spirituality, or spiritual animistic processes, might be constitutive agents in artistic cartography and artworks; how the respective embedded knowledge and affects they might produce can be addressed through monistic ontologies. Thus, I intend to explore possibilities to transform dissonant relations between animistic processes, cultural practices and globalisation, and rethink their affects and ethics.

In psychoanalytic theorising, potential spiritual dimensions, potentials of materiality and objects are approached through privileged, human-centric individualism. I aim to oppose the inherent dualisms of psychoanalytical theorising and reflect on issues such as residual spirituality through contemporary critical theory (e.g. vital materialism, and through the affective turn in cultural theory). This theorising foregrounds the “political impact of processes of becoming, defined as materially grounded transformativity that merges the ontological relationality of the human subject and the complexities of human societies” (Braidotti 2013, p. 303).

This all comes down to our relation with our others, human and non/in-human, discursive and material. In order to ground my research and explore more scientific approaches, I looked into the work of Karen Barad. She has challenged individualist metaphysics through her agential realism, the performative notion “intra-action” which she is theorising via quantum physics (Niels Bohr). “Intra-action” is the mutual constitution of entangled agencies; it is the materialisation of the individual through their ability to act that emerges from within the relationship (e.g. between people and things) not outside it. It tears down the boundaries between thought and action. Thus, in “intra-action” in particular, unlike in interaction, there is no separation between subjects; they do not maintain independency but emerge as interdependent. Terms such as mind and matter, or sociology and new materialism, do not exist independently before they begin to “intra-act”. Thus, phenomena (e.g. the Plague virus) become productive: the apparatuses of phenomenon

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<sup>28</sup> Naturally, the sites of my research should not be confused with Cartesian dualism to begin with or with other direct results of modernism in the West (rather, these influences have ‘sneaked in’ through globalisation).

production operate as “material-discursive”. For example, the Plague virus becomes entangled with human, non in-human actors, including human bodies, discourses on pandemics, fear, rural politics and healthcare, public media, history and healing practice. As such, the Plague virus could be understood as made (and unmade) through intra-actions between nature, culture and technology, through which we all intra-act with the Plague phenomenon.

Therefore “intra-actions” produce meanings and material beings simultaneously, excluding the production of ‘others’. Hence, structures are to be understood as material-discursive phenomena that are iteratively (re)produced through ongoing material-discursive “intra-actions”. In each particular “intra-action”, we (human and non/inhuman) might become co-conjugative subjects, at least for the duration of it. According to Barad (2003, p. 818), the universe could be understood “as agential intra-activity in its becoming”.

According to Barad, through “intra-actions”, all “mattering processes”, like art making, are onto-ethico-epistemological, since they merge that which is in the world (ontology) with that which we know is in the world (epistemology) and are concerned with the ethicality of this union (Dolphijn;Tuin v/d 2014, p. 166). The reason I mention Barad’s claims here is to demonstrate science-based current thinking around inclusive mind-body and matter-meaning relationships, and their relationality to ethics. The importance of Barad’s proposition for my research lies in her claim that everything that emerges as entangled mattering process (such as an artwork might do) is embedded in politics and in ethicality, through agency, which is distributed among constitutive entities. As such, it denounces cause and effect, individual agency and subject-object dichotomies by allowing for simultaneity and an inter-relational way of thinking about difference.

Moreover, according to Manuel de Landa, “... raw matter-energy through a variety of self-organising processes and an intense power of morphogenesis, generates all the structures that surround us. Furthermore, the structures generated cease to be the primary reality, and matter-energy flows now acquire this special status” (DeLanda 1996, n.p. in Dolphijn;Tuin v/d 2014, p. 91). Landa’s meaning-materiality entanglement, which engenders immanent thought and generativity of material “breaks through not only the mind-matter and culture-nature divides of transcendental humanist thought, but also thinking causal structures and teleology” (Dolphijn; Tuin v/d 2014, p. 96). As such, it might allow for shifting the hierarchy between the material and the discursive, and challenge the scholarly authority within knowledge production (Dolphijn;Tuin v/d 2014, p. 91). This might be a useful frame to think about in light of my aims in this PhD project: I explore the potentials of different levels of collaborations and co-subjectivities (human and non/in-human),

temporality and location, and how they might function - or “intra-act”- if we think in terms of Barad, in artworks.

Embodied subjectivity in new materialist thought is described by Braidotti as:

A piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire, a text written by the unfolding of genetic encoding. Neither a sacred inner sanctum, nor a pure socially shaped entity, the enfleshed Deleuzian subject is rather an “in-between”: it is a folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding outwards of affects. A mobile entity, an enfleshed sort of memory that repeats and is capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations, while remaining faithful to itself. The Deleuzian body is ultimately an embodied memory.

(Braidotti 2000, p. 159, in Dophijn: Tun v/d 2014, pp. 96-97)

However, it is important to note that rather than illustrating the aforementioned theorising in my artworks, I am interested in their potentials in relation to, and to inform, my process-orientated method of working and being with, as well as the artworks produced through and with this research. I am now in a position to explore how these theories might operate as co-actors and embedded subjectivities within this journey, and how they might enable me to (re)think transcendental and material subjectivities as agencies. Therefore, alongside the process of art-making an artwork itself might entail multivocality and discursivity. What kinds of union between meaning and material might this generate in artworks? And how might they propagate beyond the sites and places of origin, across cultural geographies and into other realms? What kind of ethical implications might this all entail and generate? What possibilities for transformative intersubjective (or subject-object) relations can be developed in my artworks using this conceptual approach? I intend that my artworks might address questions of what kind of confrontation and potential interrelation would be generated from this marginalised micro-world of the site via, for instance, material and otherworldly realms. I also wish to ask how might these confrontations and potential interrelations relate to mainstream knowledge and mechanisms, and the spectacle of mass media, and transform the potential echo chambers they might generate? How might exposure to or emphasis on these mediators, in relation to my work, or the affective shift on the middle ground, be presented in the artwork and experienced by the viewer? Might this allow for possibilities of more inclusive formation of the subject that would challenge and transform the Western conception of the human relationship with nature, which places us humans in a privileged position, and the arbitrary Western anthropocentric

categorisation between nature and culture (and life and death)? And how would this work in different locations of exhibitions and with their respective audiences?

## 1.4. Curses and solutions

Meanwhile, a couple of days passed and I finally heard via my friend from the Three Shadows that the Honourable Elderly Neighbour had his stories written down and that I could visit her home to hear them.

Throughout the translation process, I worked with bilingual translators, in this case someone who was also connected to the Honourable Elderly Neighbour, and could, when needed, check the full meaning of a word or cultural practice. After that, both texts were read through again by two other bilingual people.

Through all these dialogues and the process of working and being with, I was confident that I had a clear understanding of what this research contained and, more importantly, about its cultural relevance (and that the Honourable Elderly Neighbour was confident with the translation).

In the beginning, I thought that the Honourable Elderly Neighbour would conduct this research as a commission, and that I would naturally pay him for it. This was also agreed on at the beginning, even if his part of the agreement at this stage was just a shy smile. We did not make any kind of financial transaction or even discuss payments at first. This would have been impolite, in this particular case, as he told me that the main reason to work with me was that I was *guanxi* and that he just wanted to help me as he liked the project. He also stated that he was very curious to know more about the history of the area. However, when time for payment came, it turned out to be more complicated. With a smile, the old man refused any money. This can happen and is a regular custom of honour and gesture of goodwill towards the relationship between the two parties involved in a transaction within a close-knit community.

Despite this, I knew very well that the money would be very welcome. Also, the dynamics of *guanxi* should not be a one-way street: the exchange, should work both ways. I talked about this problem with my friends; how could I 'return the favour' and how much should I pay him? One of them suggested that I could offer the money to him in a *hong bao dai* (a red envelope), which is customarily used for giving money presents on occasions such as weddings and birthdays, and also during different national and religious

festivals. This way, the money would not appear as a payment but as a gift, and the gesture of using the envelope would allow him to accept it with dignity – actually, he would offend me should he turn it down). The second benefit of this gesture would be that this respectful transaction would solve the curse: according to the old Chinese superstitions, it is very bad luck, especially for an older person, to go to a graveyard for no apparent reason. Death is seen as something contagious. This bad luck could be reversed if something good, like money, comes from it. It worked.<sup>29</sup> However, in this sense (the reversed bad luck), the transaction was not a simple business deal between two partners but involved anthropologic and spectral gift-economy.

Since the place was mentioned in the interviews with the village residents, and in order to understand more about customs regarding death in China, I decided to visit the Dongjiao crematorium, just some 5-6 kilometres from Zhangwanfeng village.<sup>30</sup>

To our surprise, the crematorium area turned out to be almost empty: a staff member told us that this was because most cremations take place in the morning (we arrived around 2 p.m.). We were able to walk around freely and did not see anybody outside in the yard, not even a guard or an officer, nobody. We walked around the beautiful, well-maintained area and studied its newly built ancient-style buildings. What a contrast it formed to the shabby<sup>31</sup> villages surrounding it! I took many photographs documenting the buildings and the surroundings.

Next to the crematorium there was a power plant, which is nothing unusual as the suburban semi-industrial zone of Beijing is full of these due to the massive energy requirements (a photograph of this is part of the installation). Coincidentally, as it was next to a building with the name of The Crematorium (in Chinese), it gave an impression of being somehow related – as if there were so many people dying in this part of Beijing every day that they needed their own massive power plant to supply enough energy for cremation. Or reversibly, as if the energy released from the large number of burnt bodies would be collected to supply the needs of the living.

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<sup>29</sup> The Honourable Elderly Neighbour happily accepted the hong bao dai; yet, before I left China that time, he gave me knitted shoes, handmade by his wife.

<sup>30</sup> A friend of mine told me that his father knew where it was and that he would set it up for us to go there together. As my friend is an artist too and his family knows me quite well, we did not expect any problems with this idea. His family was, by now, used to the somewhat controversial things that came about in relation to the practices of art production. But when he mentioned this at home, his mother was shocked. She mentioned the bad luck that might follow a visit to the crematorium and that this curse would be stronger so close to the New Year. Also, she believed it to be particularly bad as the year was to be the Year of the Dragon. She could not explain why the Dragon was especially bad for this visit: it was just one of the deep-rooted superstitions and taboos relating to death in China.

My friend's father laughed at the concerns shown by his wife. Together we went to the crematorium that was also close to their home in the Dongba township. Yet, when we arrived, the father politely turned around at the gate and told us to take the bus back to the village; he would not go in.

<sup>31</sup> 'Shabby' is not used here as personal value judgement but as general observation: the villagers themselves would agree on this.



In relation to my research, this opened up an interesting intertwining of matter-energy or of the secular and the spiritual, how the vital as utilitarian energy passes through all bodies, human and non/inhuman.

We were even able to enter the offices of the crematorium and the ash release room, where the remains of the departed are given to their family by an official. Behind the reception counter was an uninterested young girl, in her green official government uniform, playing computer games. She said that it wasn't forbidden to take photographs (however, I doubt this). The higher official responsible for the remains was absent, so I photographed the ash release room, his formal hat laid on a table, demonstrating his authority and the official nature of these practices in China (this photograph became part of the installation).

## 1.5. Matter(s)

Back in the studio, I surrounded myself with the large number of photographs taken on the graveyards and in the crematorium, and started to work on a narrative that would combine parts of the research undertaken by the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and my personal experiences of the sites. My first problem was the mode of writing; the stories from the villages, collected by a third person, kept on referring to other people who then might talk about yet more people. How was I to address these different subjectivities, most of whom I had never met? How could I keep this open mode of meaning production and include these unknown individuals? And myself? How could I use and present these subjectivities as a means of investigation by creating a voice which would still maintain the spirit of the stories of the original investigation by the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and those who participated in it? How might I incorporate myself into the work? How might I use the rich relations to context, site and location, and the personal and communal histories that the work contained? And, in the end, would I be talking for, about or with the village's inhabitants? These questions echo Irit Rogoff's arguments for the need "... to avoid a discourse which perceives itself as "speaking about" and shift[s] towards a discourse of "speaking to" even to the extent of re-examining writing practices to alter the objectifying structures by which we organise and inhabit culture" (Rogoff to Minh-Ha 1992, p. 32). According to Rogoff, 'writing with' (an artist's work) rather than 'to' allows 'de-hierarching' of social relations governing making of meaning. This is also an objective in my own work and for this research project.

In her film *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (1983), Minh-Ha states, 'I do not intend to speak about, just speak 'nearby'. She talks about being 'beside' rather than 'looking at', in order to challenge more traditional modes of ethnographic narratives which, rather than producing empathy, embrace an omnipresence of authorities by maintaining a hierarchical relationship. The socio-cultural position of the isolated tribal African village in the 1980s, which is the site of Minh-Ha's film, is naturally far away from the suburban villages of Beijing in 2011 and 2012 that I am talking about: from their heterogeneity, and the speed of transformations inherent to urbanisation and globalisation. Both as a resident of these villages and as a human being,

a co-being of this globalising world, I feel implicated in this narrative, as a difference (as opposed to the dualistic other) among other differences. Being so, rather than positioning myself as the other, as this dualistic relationship (between the self and the other) is still implicated in Minh Ha's approach and words, I might describe my position as speaking with? Thus, what I am aiming for is an active intersubjective relationship.

These considerations led me to investigate how I might transform both the artwork in itself and the viewer's experience of it. How might it propagate shifts in perception from one person to another and between the viewer, the author and the artwork in different times and spaces? How might this challenge and shift the binaries between the viewer (and author) and the artwork and allow 'de-hierarchisation' of these relationships? In psychoanalytical theorising (e.g. Lacan and Freud), and in essentialist identity politics, subjective differences could be understood as gaps that need to be overcome or as a lack of sameness. Rather than categorising difference in terms of the (im)possibility of sameness, theorists such as Deleuze (1968) argue for an ethics constituted by an affirmative response to different identities, but not through emphasising an inability to understand or by trying to totalise the Other. My aim with this project was not to stress the distance inherent in the difference or to try to implant meaning: this would simply place one difference above the other difference. Reflecting difference, in my opinion, necessitates a relationality that is generated through deep negotiation with multiple ecologies: social, environmental, political and psychic. Can subjective differences, embedded in the artwork, argue for an ethical reflection and response by the viewer? If so, how?

After several different exercises and attempts, I concluded that the method of working and being with in itself was the key. It was all about intersubjectivity, I needed to reflect on and through this dialogue between differences. So, when writing text, which I intended to use in some form in the final installation, I started using the third person pronoun.

During his first visit to the village, he met a local man more than 70 years old, who taught him a bit of the village's history. The village is called Zhangwanfen and is a part of the Jinzhan township in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing. It is named after a villager with the surname Zhang. He was the most prominent resident of the village between the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican period.

Excerpt of the audio piece, a part of the final installation, full written text added to Appendix A and the audio on DVD.

In order to address my own encounters on the sites, I decided to incorporate them into the text as if they had happened to the unidentified 'he' in the final audio piece.

When he was documenting the graves, an elderly man came to him on his bicycle. The man raised his left arm over his chest and said to him that when taking a photograph of a grave, one should say a-mi-tuo-fo, meaning 'may Buddha protect' or 'may Buddha preserve us', three times to soothe the spirits around the graves, and to show one's respect to the dead. If one does not do this it will bring bad luck, as the spirits grow angry and deliver nightmares and misfortune.

Excerpt of the audio piece, a part of the final installation, full written text added to Appendix A and the audio on DVD.

The stories started to build a narrative, which combined oral histories, different times – pasts, presents, futures and future-pasts – reflections on socio-political conditions and cultural practices, including fluid interconnections to the otherworldly, as well as communal and personal accounts of everyday life outside the spectacle of the mass media.

This mode of writing allowed me to address multiple unidentified subjectivities, human and non-human, a method which loosely echoes Deleuze, who calls such position "free-indirect discourse". Deleuze, building on Pasolini's Double Subjectivity, describes free indirect discourse as "differentiation of two (or more) correlative subjects in a system itself heterogeneous" and "assemblage of enunciation, putting into effect at the same time two inseparable acts of subjectification" (1989, pp. 73 and 106). Thus, this position is neither objective or subjective but rather something semi-subjective that represents the view of a person whose third person identity slips into first-person speech without identifying itself. In the final version of the story, which I would incorporate into my installation, I intended this to create a kind of 'multiple subjectification' or generation of multiple subject positions within a heterogeneous system. It presented multiple perceptions within a perception, for example, my written text or account of all the material, combining the stories of the village residents, the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and my own encounters on the sites.

After the text was finished, it was proofread in English and translated into Chinese. Both the English text and the Chinese translation were proofed by multiple bilingual people. Following this, I gave the Chinese translation to the Honourable Elderly Neighbour for approval. The irony is, of course, that for the main characters (me, the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and, indirectly, the village residents) this process is not transparent because we do not

understand each other's language. So, to meet the ethical burden, for the 'truthfulness' of the translations it was our turn to trust our *guanxi*.

At this point of the process, surrounded by the photographs from the sites and inspired by stories, I started contemplating the possibility of transforming this subject-object relationship to create artworks. I wanted to challenge these dualisms as grounded in the materiality of the sites of propagation, the villages. In doing so, my aim was to challenge both the psychological theorising of abjection and the understanding of the constancy of subjective perception within the subject-object relationship as a condition of identity, by situating the processes of abjection in relation to animism as a theory and as embedded within encounters, materiality and local knowledge.

I contemplated the transformative processes, the interplay between simultaneous contradictions co-existing and taking place on and around the graveyards, for example, the pollution, death and decay, poverty, exclusion and relocation of people. I was thinking about the long history of the sites, through the different dynasties that contributed to diversity of cultural practices, to the Cultural Revolution that broke them down and to globalisation, which hybridised these practices, opening the doors to global economics that have, in turn, contributed to and accelerated the current conditions. Due to these expressive but fluid qualities, material, natural and conceptual fluidities, I started to contemplate the idea of interconnecting the materiality of the graveyards and cultural practices within the artwork in progress. I started thinking about situating the rituals of honouring and prayer in relation to these transformative processes, both human and non-human, of this in-between landscape. Could, for example, the ritual of prayer, or a suggestion of it, be applied in order to question modes of spectator engagement in relation to the site? Might this ritual be applied to connect two or more geolocations, as prayer, in variations, is practised worldwide? What would we, the author and the viewer, ultimately be praying for? And is this last question even relevant in the context of art or this PhD project? These were my concerns when starting the process of using this material to assemble or rather to become a co-actor and active force in an art installation.

Looking at the photographs and thinking about graveyards, it struck me that the proportions of the gravestones were very similar to Taoist prayer pillows I had seen sold in the shops around temples. These pillows are in two parts, a set of two pillows form one: a pillow for the body to kneel on and a pillow for the head for the ritual of prayer. Together, the two pillows correspond with the gravestones and both the gravestones and the prayer pillows reflect the proportions of the human body. I started my search by purchasing one set of the 'real' prayer pillows, in order to study their proportions and qualities, and just to live with them for a while.

Customarily, Taoist prayer pillows are red, yellow or orange, which are, among other colours, considered spiritual in Buddhism. But since these pillows would propose relation to tombstones and to performing a prayer ritual for the ghosts, rather than for the Gods, I wanted the pillows to be grey. Together with my assistant, I headed to the big market close to the Beijing South Railway Station.<sup>32</sup> Back at the studio, I laid the selected fabrics on the floor, side by side, in order to choose one. They lay there for some days and finally I decided to use brocade as the silvery glow of the grey brocade somehow also reflected on the materiality and colour of ash and the glow of fire on metal. One evening I was discussing the fabrics with my Chinese friends, one of whom pointed out that one of the pieces of material had a dragon pattern on it. While the imprints of prayer pillows nowadays do not have specific patterns, he explained to me that dragons fly in the sky and that as a pattern for a prayer pillow, which would lie on the ground, the motif of a flying dragon would feel unnatural to the Chinese. So, based on this grounded reasoning of the relationship between a mythical creature and the ground I chose the abstract pattern, which was actually very similar to those used in the real pillows.

Finally, I designed the prayer pillows by reflecting on the shapes of the gravestones and by measuring them carefully while on the site. The bigger pillows, on which one kneels, were in their original size but the smaller pillows, on which one bows one's head, reflect the different carved shapes of the tops of the gravestones – round, square, shaped differently at the corners:

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<sup>32</sup> The place to be in Beijing for all interested in fabrics and sewing materials.



Image 9. Prayer pillow for sale outside a shop close to Lama Temple in Beijing

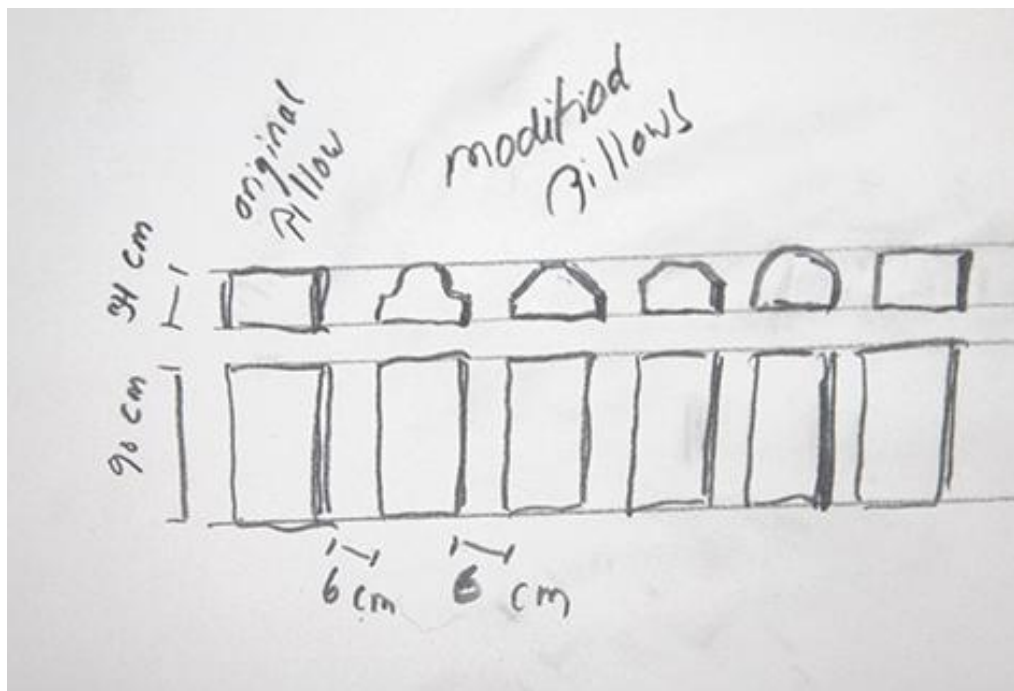


Image 10. Sketch to demonstrate alterations done to integrate the gravestone with the Taoist prayer pillow

The sizes of the modified pillows correspond to both, 20.3.2011

Continuing my contemplation of the materiality of the graveyards, I started to think about filling the pillows with materials that reflected the latter. This would create a literal and physical connection between the sites and the exhibition spaces. When thinking about materials, I was considering the earth, the sand and soil, the vegetation and trees, which nourish themselves with the ashes of the dead. In itself, ash is the material of the dead body that remains after cremation and of the burnt offerings after their properties are transferred to be used as currency in the after world. I was thinking about the offering rituals and food that are brought to the graves for the spirits. I was contemplating using tea as an offering, since it has an important place in Chinese culture and also globally, for trade. China is the world's largest tea producer. The global trade of tea, with its imperial history and current ethical implications, somehow connected the ancient rituals of tea drinking with global economics. I decided to fill the pillows with sand, earth, tree bark, ash and tea. These materials allowed me to reflect on other-than-human forces as active agencies, the natural life worlds and objects through local animistic traditions, such as the cosmic connectedness of all things, human and non-human, but also as specific, coextensive and ontological as themselves. The materiality might have become a co-actor, an active participant, reflecting animistic ideas: how materials might function as mediators between times, places, realms and things, between worlds that seem, in the modernist Western view, incommensurate.

In the context of this installation, might the use of natural materials found everywhere, such as sand, ash and tea, shift the relationship between the self and the other (the human and non-and in-human other) for the viewing subject? Grounded in this materiality, might the installation open interconnection between the sites of propagation (the graveyards in China) and the exhibitions in global locations? What kind of relations of interdependency might these particular life worlds, including the spectral ones and objects, these co-actors, produce?

Also reflecting on death in relation to deeper social-economic inequality, artist Teresa Margolles<sup>33</sup> uses forensic material in her installations. *Aire* (2004), consists of several humidifiers in an empty space. The water circulated by the humidifiers in the installation was originally used to wash the bodies of the unidentified, anonymous, often murdered, dead in the Mexico City mortuaries. The humidifiers pump the damp of this water into the air of the exhibition space, which the visitor then can feel on their skin and even inhale. Margolles's work explores themes of death and violence in Mexican society. The rigorous realism in her choice of material ('dirty' water) confronts the

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<sup>33</sup> Here I need to stress that it is not my intention to criticise the artworks, opinions or notions of other artists included in this research. On the contrary, they are selected as I value them (the individuals, opinion and artworks) highly, even if I might draw different or opposite conclusions while referring to them.



viewer with the origin of the materiality which, as part of the artwork, literally penetrates the viewer.



Image 11. Teresa Margolles, *El agua en la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City's water) [*Aire*], Installation with 2-3 warm mist humidifiers, 2001

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann

Exhibition view:

"Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence", iCI & Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia, cur. José Roca, 2008

In Margolles's work, the materials reflect on forensics. It could be understood that a crime has been committed by one or more individuals towards another individual. In her work, the anonymity of the victim is part of the crime. The process of abjection is experienced by literally inhaling the Other, the damp of the water, the very same water used for washing corpses in Mexico City. Inhaling the other is as close as one can get: one is literally embodied with the other and, through this, is implicated.

In an exhibition in a global location, the site-specific origin of the vapour inhaled, gathered from the washing water of the dead bodies in the Mexico City morgue, could be understood as belonging to the socio-economical system of the other. Might this site specificity allow the viewer to take distance in other locations for exhibitions through which the work might operate more politically in Mexico? Could this relationship be shifted, in order to include the viewer even more, inclusively, ethically and materially possibly by stressing the processes of interdependency and contingency or by addressing more than one geolocation at once? Could the viewer, as well as myself as the author, be implicated, not by literally 'inhaling' the residue of other, but by being connected? In my installation, I decided to use local materials, for example, sand, tree bark, tea and ash from the very location wherever the installation would be exhibited. Might the use of local material, the specific shift in ontology, suggest a shift in the relationship between the sites and the exhibition of the location, which literally transforms the subject-object relationship? But does the use of local material really make a difference? Might it accelerate the ethical and physical shift, by stressing the interconnection of us humans being biological and chemical and interrelated beyond geopolitics and identity politics? Might this propose that we all are simultaneously the product and victim of and a participant in the globalising world and its economy? Might the origin of materiality, which functions as an active co-actor, make a difference in ways it might transform the experience of distance between the Self and the Other, and the sites and the exhibition space to experience of nearness? In traditional Chinese thought, as well as in vital materialism, nothing in the universe is ever fixed but is in a state of continual transformation through the dynamic flows of energy (Qi). This connectivity operates throughout the universe. In this sense, Chinese thinking echoes concepts of new materialism or vice versa.

What I aim to examine is how the specific ontology of the materiality utilised in artworks might influence and generate content; how might it affect the union of meaning and materiality.

I started reflecting on how to compose the installation, how to arrange the pillows. It felt natural and logical to reflect on the seemingly random composition of the graves on the sites, which is based on interpretations of Feng Shui, practised by the villagers while selecting the position of the

graves, as opposed to the rigid way this is done at the official civil graveyards and at national monuments such as the graveyard of Babaoshan.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery is Beijing's main resting place for the highest-ranking revolutionary heroes, high government officials and, in recent years, individuals deemed of major importance due to their contribution to society, which also includes individuals from the entertainment sector like a famous TV comedian.



Image 12. Feng Shui at Babaoshan Revolutionary cemetery, Beijing 2011



Image 13. Feng Shui at Qianweikou village graveyard  
Photo, 65x90 cm, part of the installation

## 1.6. From text to speech

At the studio, I laid the first set of pillows on the floor and asked my assistant to deliver the sand, tree bark and soil. I went back to Dongba, to my friend's tea store, to select the tea to be used. Chinese tea varies greatly in quality and price, and for what I was planning to do, smell was more important than quality. I chose the low-quality Gunpowder, which is the cheapest but still has a strong odour, and I also bought a few kg of low-quality jasmine, both of which are also widely available worldwide, thus traversing the global and local and hence reflecting global trades.

Back at my studio, I started experimenting with quantity and the relationship between the materials with which the prayer pillows would be filled. How many parts sand, soil, tree bark and tea should each pillow contain? What to use for the ash? After experimentation, and some days of smelling tea in an enclosed space, I came out with the rough amount of two parts sand and soil, one part tree bark and 1 kg tea in each pillow (the big and the small one). The determining qualities for the quantity of each substance were smell and the final form or firmness of the pillows, I was experimenting with how much sand (the firmest of these materials) was needed for the pillow to keep its shape in relation to tree bark, herbs and tea, which provided the olfactory qualities. The ash was produced by burning a small quantity of paper money because its properties can transfer to the afterlife.

So I was sitting on the pillows, feeling and smelling them, looking at the photographs and reading the stories. How could I present the story to the audience? Because of the handwritten documents (the accounts of the Honourable Elderly Neighbour), I started thinking about a written presentation. But how could the Western lettering match the uniqueness of the Chinese documents? I made some experiments by hand and typed, on different kind of papers and in different formats. None of them felt right and it did not seem to make any sense: the documentation was 'just' documentation and the original stories were vocal. So I decided to use voice. But whose voice? And why voice? To embody a narrative? As well as being the artist and the author, I was also a co-editor or co-author of the stories, so it was logical that I would do the voice-over myself. But there should be a Chinese voice, too, a co-voice-over. Should I ask the Honourable Elderly Neighbour? Then we would have one male and one female voice. The story, including both the collected stories and my accounts of my personal experiences on the sites, would be told as it had all happened to one person, the Honourable Elderly Neighbour, a man. But the old man is extremely softly spoken and shy. I thought of the contrast between my rather loud voice and his. Is there a relevance to the gender of the narrator in this story as all is told in the third person and the original storytellers include both male and female?

I was thinking about the Finnish and Chinese languages and the absence of gender pronouns in both. What if the voice-over in Chinese was done by a woman, too?

My assistant, Zhang Yueyue, who has a clear voice, some experience in recitation and a local accent, wanted to do the voice-over in Chinese. However, the final version and the pronoun 'she' used could potentially belong to another character.

For this recording, I needed to practise my Mandarin pronunciation for hours. Words such as the names of people, provinces and cities they came from needed to be in Mandarin. I recorded my assistant's voice on my computer and kept on repeating her words endlessly: Shandong, Hebei and Shaanxi ... Sunhe Chaoyang ... Zhongweigou ...<sup>35</sup> Even these relatively simple words are very complicated because of the many and varied tones and sounds of the Mandarin language. Luckily, the pronunciation turned out to be understandable, despite my heavy foreign accent.

The final recordings, Chinese and English, were realised in an improvised sound studio in the village: every now and then, we had to stop as the howling and barking of the village dogs disturbed the recording session, and start over.

Might this adaptive use of free-indirect discourse (Deleuze), the multiple subject positions somehow shift the hierarchy? Might the distance from the original storyteller somehow create nearness, as the viewer is not confronted by the individual ego of the storyteller but by multiple subjectivities, who all feel the urgency to tell the story further? Am I talking to, with or for the village inhabitants? Might this way of recording allow the viewer to identify with the villagers, not only and solely by means of politics of recognition, but by being implicated in the story, by the human experience and affect which shifts the boundaries of Self and Other to a dialogue that can be understood as inclusive?

The village is called Zhangwanfen and is a part of the Jinzhan township in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing. It is named after a villager with the surname Zhang. He was the most prominent resident of the village between the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican period.

The Zhangs were the wealthiest family; it's also said that they were the family of a third-ranking officer. Because they had money and influence, the family was nicknamed 'Zhang Baiwan', meaning 'Zhang one hundred ten thousand', in other words, 'Zhang one million'. The Zhang ancestral grave used to be next to the village, and it later became known as 'Zhang One Hundred Ten Thousand Grave' village.

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<sup>35</sup> The reader can hear all of this in the final audio piece which is added to the documentation.

### Excerpt from the audio piece

According to the Chinese numeric system, 'one hundred ten thousand' (百万 baiwan in pinyin) refers to one million. As the nickname of a wealthy local family turned into the nickname for the village, the name also implies the greed and abuse of power of its forbears. I was amused by the connotations in the story, between economics, death and the myriad power structures implicated in the name.

I am borrowing the title, *One Hundred Ten Thousand*, for my installation from the writings of the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and the audio piece.

As the title of my installation, the name reflects on this condition in the installation on both a collective and personal level, referring to the numerous similar villages, the singularity, repetition and differences within and between them. This is to point out that the villages in my research are not exceptional, not a singular condition, but rather an abject, epidemic side effect of urbanisation and globalisation sweeping through China's urban areas.



## 1.7. Exhibition of the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)

In this section, I introduce the final multisensory installation, *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12).

The final artwork consists of:

A series of eight (65x90 cm) mounted colour photographs of the graveyards outside the villages.

A series of four (40x65 cm) mounted colour photographs of Dongjiao crematorium, where the dead bodies are burnt.

Objects, modified Taoist prayer pillows turned to gravestones, made of Chinese brocade filled with sand, soil, tree bark, dry herbs tea and ash.

Odour of the substances inside the pillows.

Documents; handwritten accounts by my neighbour, a retired taxi driver, of interviews with the residents of the villages, in Mandarin.

Audio piece, based on the accounts of the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and my personal experiences on the sites while photographing the graves, in English and Mandarin.<sup>36</sup>

Voice-over in Mandarin by Zhang Yueyue.

Voice-over in English by the author.

Dimensions of the installation (number of pillows) vary according to the size of the exhibition space.

I introduce here the installation as it was presented in the exhibition, *Dwellers on the Threshold* (together with Qiu JiongJiong and Tal R), in Star Gallery, Beijing, March-April 2016. I discuss it here not as an illustrating of the theory but as a way of leading the investigation.

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<sup>36</sup> The audio can be translated and presented in a third language. For example, in 2014-2015, *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) was part of my solo show *Two Rivers* in Skaftfell Center for Visual Art in Iceland, and the audio was translated and recited in Icelandic by local artist Gunnhildur Hauksdottir.



Images 14 and 15. *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)  
 'Dwellers on the Threshold', in Star Gallery, Beijing March-April 2016.





Image 16. Close-up of prayer pillows in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)



Image 17. Audio *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)



When entering the exhibition space, the viewer sees the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), which in this setting consists of 40 sets of prayer pillows lying on the floor in a disorganised manner, two photo series (eight photographs of the graveyards and four of the crematorium), mounted on Dibond, framed written documents on the walls and audio on portable speakers.

The shape of the prayer pillows is modified by the author to reflect not only the shape of traditional two part Taoist prayer pillows, but also the gravestones next to the tombs, which are presented in the photo series on the wall. Instead of the traditional colours used for prayer pillows in China, red, yellow and orange, the pillows are grey to suggest praying to Ghosts instead of Gods. The content of the pillows, the soil, sand, tree bark, tea and leaves refer to and embody the materiality of the graveyard and the natural life cycle of organisms: the transformativity of materiality, the cosmic continuum, as well as the Chinese custom of honouring the ancestors by bringing food, drink, gifts and money to their tombs. They aim to merge meaning and materiality. They might suggest the closeness of death and its physical as well as immaterial properties. They aim to situate spirituality in relation to vital materialism and ethics; to the politics of global consumption and opportunistic economy; of consumption of life itself through which our relation to the other might be redefined (Braidotti 2014, p. 319).

The seemingly random composition of the pillows in the space reflects the random interpretations of Feng Shui practised by the villagers when selecting the position of the graves. A faint smell of the materiality, the tea, the earth, the dry herbs and tree bark, from inside the pillows fills the air.

The series of eight colour photographs is presented facing the installation of pillows on the wall.





Image 19. Photo series of eight *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)  
Each is 65x90 cm.

The handwritten texts, the documents containing interviews with the village residents, on different kinds of small pieces of notebook paper of the research are mounted in wooden frames and placed on the wall, in chronological order.



Image 20. Handwritten documents, framed to protect them as they are unique

Each is 35x30 cm.

## 前苇沟村基本概况补充说明

前苇沟村村委会的西侧有一个文化广场，面积约有一千四百平方米，建于2008年，这个规模在乡里村中是不多见的。该广场供村民休闲娱乐（如：唱歌、拉琴、跳舞、下棋、球类运动）村里有一支近百人的业余秧歌队，每年还参加乡里组织的秧歌比赛。

建于2011年12月18日，19日先后两次去该村走访调查。前苇沟村历史悠久，村里三代同堂的户数较一般村子多。该村至今已有一千多年的历史。

2011年12月20日

(第 页)

Image 21. Close-up of one of the documents

The text is used as the basis for the audio piece.

Photo series of four Dongjiao crematorium (40x60 cm each).



The series of smaller unframed colour photographs of the Dongjiao crematorium in Beijing is presented as installation.



Image 22. Side building with power plant as the backdrop to Dongjiao crematorium, 2012

40x60 cm.



Image 23. Side building, Dongjiao crematorium 2012

40x60 cm.



Image 24. Main building, Dongjiao crematorium 2012

40x60 cm.



Image 25. Ash release room Dongjiao crematorium 2012

40x65 cm.

Due to their documentary-like qualities, the photographs might give the spectator insight into the socio-economic differences in situations relating to the rituals of burial and disposal of the body. The crematorium where villagers are now cremated is luxurious compared to the ditch by the highway that is their final resting place.

In this exhibition, the audio piece is played via two portable loudspeakers placed in-between the pillows at a distance from each other, so that the different languages (Chinese and English) can be heard without disturbing each other. The audience can sit or lie on the pillows while listening. In the audio pieces, the personal stories and oral histories told by the residents of Zhangwanfeng and Qianweikou village merge with my accounts of personal encounters in the graveyards.

The installation forms a kind of a lounge where the spectator can absorb, inhale and exhale the odour of the substances inside the pillows and listen to the audio. The pillows invite and allow the spectator to kneel, pray or just sit down, contemplating and listening to the audio piece.

The pressure of the spectator's bodyweight would leave a distinct imprint on the pillows, which then would change when the next spectator uses them. Unused, these imprints would fade away slowly, as the material stabilises, over time. Once kneeling or sitting on the pillows, it is my intention that the spectator would become activated<sup>37</sup> and de-centred<sup>38</sup> (Bishop 2005) as they experience the odour of the natural substances with which the pillows are filled. When one rests one's head on the pillow, the odour becomes overwhelming, intoxicating. The spectator could feel the substances on their forehead, arms and legs. I intend the experience to reawaken the viewer's sensory relationship to the materiality and open up a heightened self-awareness of phenomenological perceptions. However, in my work, there is never a question of pure phenomenological experience, such as in Merleau-Ponty (1962): rather than 'contaminating' the phenomenological experience with 'a priori' meaning or contextualisation, I seek for phenomenological means in order to disengage subjectivity from oppositional consciousness and to reflect on shifts between the content, different contexts, times and locations. I do this in order to emancipate the potential effects of materials and enable new avenues for contextualisation and de-territorialisation by the viewer. The ritual of prayer, in all its variations, is practised worldwide. Yet, the personal relationship with the one being prayed to, the 'force', God or divine power, can be defined as singular, personal, even within connective spiritual systems such as animism and Buddhism. The suggestion or performed ritual of prayer might then transform the relationship between the artwork, the viewer and the different contexts, but also the subject-object

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<sup>37</sup> Rather than optical contemplation, I emphasise sensory immediacy and physical participation.

<sup>38</sup> De-centring as opposed to perspective in, for example, painting and as a view of the central Cartesian subject.

relationship by suggesting animistic ideas and mediations within it. In itself, the pillow, through its content, might become a non-human subject: the materiality inside the pillow can be understood as a being with soul or as embedding a spirit. Yet the action of prayer – or suggestion of it – or simply the physical contact with the pillows could evoke processes such as abjection and fear in relation to contamination, death and decay. Simultaneously, it might also evoke contradictory emotions of harmony and acceptance and generate the need for contemplation. Could the spectator's experience be transformed from a process of psychoanalytical abjection, as an individual relationship, to a process of abjection entangled with the process of becoming, as it intertwines productively with other processes? And so doing possibly operate as inclusive of the other, the human and the non/in-human. Could it be understood as, rather than as a process of exclusion and self-definition, one of becoming inclusive and mutual? Of becoming imperceptible of the individual self? Might these material and sensory elements challenge anthropocentrism?

I am interested in considering how this might challenge the relationship between author, viewer and artwork, and to allow these engage in a dialogue with each other; but also how it might open up possibilities for the location, or the site of origin (the graveyard), to engage in an interrelation with another location, that of the exhibition space. Thus, by oscillating between the physical, mental and psychic experience, the mind-body and material-meaning inter-relations, I am proposing that the installation might evoke possibilities for the viewer to actively to relate to the ethical side of the conditions of the sites, in human proximity, in the experience of the artwork. Might the work, this way, produce experience of nearness rather than distance, thereby allowing for an ethical union between humans no matter where they are geologically and geopolitically located?

And further, might it allow for a more inclusive thinking of ourselves (humans) and our relation to non-human and the in-human? Might it allow for the human – the Western or monotheistic subject – to be de-sacralised and, through this, create the potential for post-secular residual spirituality? Might it generate an entanglement of the material, the metaphysical, the discursive and the political, and thus become ethical? These are central concerns arising from being a nomadic artist and important considerations to my overall argument.

## 1.8. Reflection and dialogues

In this section, I reflect on works by other artists in relation to *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) and current theorising. I also refer to other artists' work, that of Libia Castro, Ólafur Ólafsson, Hito Steyerl and Zachary Formwalt. Further, I use reflections of random viewers in exhibitions and presentations in various contexts as well dialogues conducted with individuals from the field of fine art: artist and curator Ma Yongfeng, artist and curator Alessandro Rolandi, theorist and curator Mika Hannula, artist Megumi Shimizu (Qingshui Huimei), and artist Yu Bogong, in different formats, modes, settings and places<sup>39</sup>.

These dialogues emphasise the importance of the viewer's subjective ideas and experiences, in order to gain feedback for this research project. Thus, by rejecting certain aspects of existing scientific methods commonly used in narrative interviews, such as sets of formulated questions and evaluation methods, my intention for these dialogues is to enable the viewer, or rather interviewee, to actively form their contents and contexts by allowing them to open up and continue the discussion on topics of their choice.

The first informal presentation (2012) of the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) took place in my studio in Beijing. I invited all the people I was working with in this project as well as local and visiting artists, villagers and friends. The Honourable Elderly Neighbour also came with his granddaughter. He was standing in the corner, shyly listening to the audio. He listened to it several times, both the English and the Chinese, and told me that the story was a good presentation of the local history and the conditions in both the demolished villages and those due for demolition. Then he smiled and, referring to the female voice speaking his words, said that he spoke very good English, but only as a woman. Thus, the multiple subject positions did suggest generating inter-subjective relationships, a transformation of the relationship between the Self and the Other (between me, the Honourable Elderly Neighbour and the village residents). My assistant's voice and words became his voice and words, and vice versa, including the voices and words of unidentified people from the villages. We were speaking together, with each other, suggesting a new way of 'de-hierarching' the relations governing the making of the meaning, as well as exploring Deleuze's point of free-indirect discourse. Deleuze, building on Pasolini's Double Subjectivity, describes free-indirect discourse as "differentiation of two (or more) correlative subjects in a system that is in itself heterogeneous" and "assemblage of enunciation, putting into effect at the same time two inseparable acts of subjectification" (Deleuze 1989, pp. 73 and 106). In *One*

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<sup>39</sup> Recordings and transcriptions are in the possession of the author.

*Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), these different voices might allow for intersubjectivity that generates inclusivity.

During this short presentation, the necessity of and the relationship between the photographs of the sites and the gravestones proved to be crucial, even here, in an exhibition at the very site of origin: my studio at Caochangdi. For example, on entering it, an artist who lived in the area asked me whether the pillows were car seats. Only after he had seen the photographs did he make the link between the gravestones and the pillows. The transformation of the pillows as gravestones seemed to be experienced as a credible intervention by the viewer, even though it did not have a direct reference to a cultural practice – people do not bring prayer pillows to the graves nor do they make gravestone-shaped pillows. The prayer pillows seemed to suggest generative shifts between realms for the viewers. The pillows might have been transformed from the physical stone in a public space that marks a grave to active agents of energy flows, subjects or to mediators between social, political and cultural spaces and the spiritual realm and afterworld. In this context, China and the site of origin, many people actually sat on the pillows but only two kneeled and performed a ritual. Some people simply bent down next to the pillows, in order to smell their contents and touch them. This could have been due to respect and ethicality towards the context of the installation or the content of the pillows, in relation to the deeply rooted taboo about death (i.e. closeness to representation of death would bring bad luck or that death in itself would somehow be contagious, that the viewer might somehow 'catch' it simply by being in close proximity to the pillows). Death and the abjection of death became embodied, through the brain and body, through material and conceptual fluidities. They might have generated affirmation of multiplicity and relational connections with our embodied materiality in relation to the cosmic and the infinite.

The audience's approach to the pillows was much more straightforward in my solo exhibition in Amsterdam (Gallery Lumen Travo, October-November 2012). They engaged with the setting of the pillows by directly sitting or lying on them. They also experimented with performing diverse personal prayer rituals and experiencing different (individual) sensations evoked by the materiality and the odour. The installation of pillows became a lounge where people, whole families on a few occasions, would lie down to listen to the audio. The audience was attracted primarily to the audio piece as it opened up the context. Through the stories, they reported that they could get a deeper understanding of the conditions of the sites of origin in the installation. Simultaneously, this allowed them to relate to the stories and sites and to take time to form thoughts and examine the subjective affect of the installation, as well as contemplate the possible interconnections the installation might propose. The initial mode of engagement of the audience seemed to be

different to that of Chinese audiences, who were more concerned with the materiality of the pillows (I will explore this further at a later stage).

Returning to the audio: similar methods of utilising oral stories and histories and approaches were applied, for example, in *Bosbolobosboco 6* (2004, ongoing), Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson's series of biomorphic sculptural installations, where alien (of outer space) like forms with tentacles function as a couch. They also incorporate audio components. In *Bosbolobosboco 6* (Departure–Transit–Arrival) (2014), voices of refugees in Australia tell personal stories such as individual struggles with immigration laws, departure, belonging and integration in dialogue with psychologist Nina Melksham. In *Bosbolobosboco 6* (2014), the viewer, sitting in the 'alien' sculpture, is confronted with the personal story of the other, addressing problems and resistance towards identifiable authorities. The viewer is, literally, physically placed in the position of the other by sitting in the alien couch, much like the refugee might have felt in discussion with a Western psychologist, listening to the individual stories. There might be a shift between the position of the self and the other, implying a shift of perception to produce nearness (rather than distance), through ethical inclusion of the viewer and intersubjective relation with the other.



Image 26. Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, *Bosbolobosboco 6* (Departure–Transit–Arrival) (2014)

Wood, shredded cardboard, textiles, used clothes, layers of packing tape and audio (installation view Sydney Biennial (2014). Image courtesy of the artists.



Similar dynamics are intended in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12). However, through the adapted form of free-indirect discourse and locally gathered materiality, the multiple subject positions told by one voice, the artist's in English and her assistant's in Mandarin, the third person narrative intends to enable the viewer to relate and identify with the site's and residents' conditions as included, not as ultimate Other, but interrelated difference. The absence of directly identifiable individual voices is intended to challenge the specific sets of rules that govern ideas of identity according to the nation state system, simply by suggesting operation outside these definitions. The distance taken (e.g. unidentified voices and unidentified gravestones) in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), seems to produce, somewhat paradoxically, nearness which might allow the processes of resistance to turn towards ourselves, regardless of the geolocation of the site of origin or the location where the installation is shown. Both installations (*Bosbolobosboco 6* (2014) and *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12)) could be contextualised as resistance to the spectacle of mass media, and disembedded, on distance-constructed ontologies (e.g. via online research or archives). These methods might often exclude the non-heroic, minor stories and histories, and local perspectives and might be seen as privileging hierarchical cosmopolitan modes of nomadic art practice.

I am concerned with how nomadic politics, extensive lived experience, incorporation of local knowledge and different levels of collaboration might be incorporated into my artworks and what the ethical implications might be. Today, globalised circulation of knowledge has opened up forms of research and practice of speculative possibilities that characterise the economic, social and technological conditions in which artists work. According to Bourriaud (2009), within the current globalised reality, artists produce singular routes and travels, both real and virtual, within the different streams of knowledge, rather than insisting on 'representing' their own cultures. This entails a dive into the world of the other and a negotiation of the subject's (the artist's, the artwork's and the audience's) relationship to it. Through this, the reconfigured relationship becomes ethical. The globalised circulation of knowledge has generated and enables modes of research and practice research based solely on virtual research or knowledge gathering via literature or mass media, or by delving into archives and institutional collections. While these constructions, constellations and cartographies might allow the artist to reflect on multiple subjects, create intellectual puzzles and react to world politics, they are produced without – and through this might remain positioned – outside direct and sensible readings of the sites' politics and life, outside human proximity. While the effect of some works produced by the aforementioned methods is undeniable (I am not saying here that these approaches are wrong or unethical) I am concerned that they might be

in danger of appearing detached from their context. Through this, might they be seen as a mere hypothesis, or as loose exercises that might need further investigation, demand to be more grounded? These are important questions which I aim to examine in this research.

For example, in her practice, artist Hito Steyerl critically investigates, or rather speculates on, the impact of the internet and the digital realm on our everyday lives. She reflects on the problems of the documentary, both as genre and as an artistic medium by claiming that in this age of global circulation of knowledge and visual material, we are not dealing with an image any more but 'merely' with post-production, mainly drawing from images and information from mass media. How compelling and moving the results might be, in my view, and the critical undercurrent could be a reflection of our detachment from the material world and from its temporalities and localities. Her practice could be seen as reflecting the shifts in power relations between the individual and the technologically driven and dominated world. In relation to my project, one could ask how can we speak about post-internet art and digital literacy when statistically less than half of the world's population has access to the internet. Further, extensive and still increasing censorship in China prohibits residents from accessing and benefiting from global information. In this sense, while the internet is generally understood as connective, could it also be seen as producing exclusivity and marginality?

Limited individual, affective, socio-cultural and political contact can lead to one-sided, literal projections of global knowledge and one-sided understanding – an echo chamber- of local sites and conditions without engagement in affective dialogue through sensitive embedded readings and dialogue on the site. I think that without embedding in localities, artists might be in danger of becoming mere detached commentators. Please note that I do not pose these questions in criticism of Steyerl's work. In this research, I refer to Steyerl's practice solely as an example. Nor am I criticising documentary as an artistic medium. Rather I am concerned with the modes of knowledge production through this genre when based on public global knowledge: how it might intensify worldviews that then solely echo back to the authors own beliefs and understanding and filter out all other (local) voices and possible understandings.

For instance, in the exchange project *Time, Trade and Travel* (SMBA, Amsterdam 2012), artist Zachary Formwalt developed a film *A Projective Geometry* (2012). The main problem of the *Time, Trade and Travel* project, just as with so many other global collaborative projects, was that the artists had very limited time to visit each other's country and communicate and exchange with each other. A second problem with this show was that the artists were 'divided' into those from Ghana and those from Amsterdam.

Therefore, the potential for in-depth interexchange and intersubjectivity was very limited. Nevertheless, in the end the artists were expected to react to or reflect this exchange in their own artworks. Due to this, in his project, Formwalt could be said to be critically investigating diverse modes of using knowledge in global artistic research and the understanding and effects of colonialism. Hence, he could also be understood as simultaneously, consciously and critically, engaged with a literal projection of knowledge upon the sites and the lives of others. In this sense, Formwalt might be criticising the post-colonial and cultural imperialistic approaches in methods of transcultural collaboration and within artistic reconfigurations.

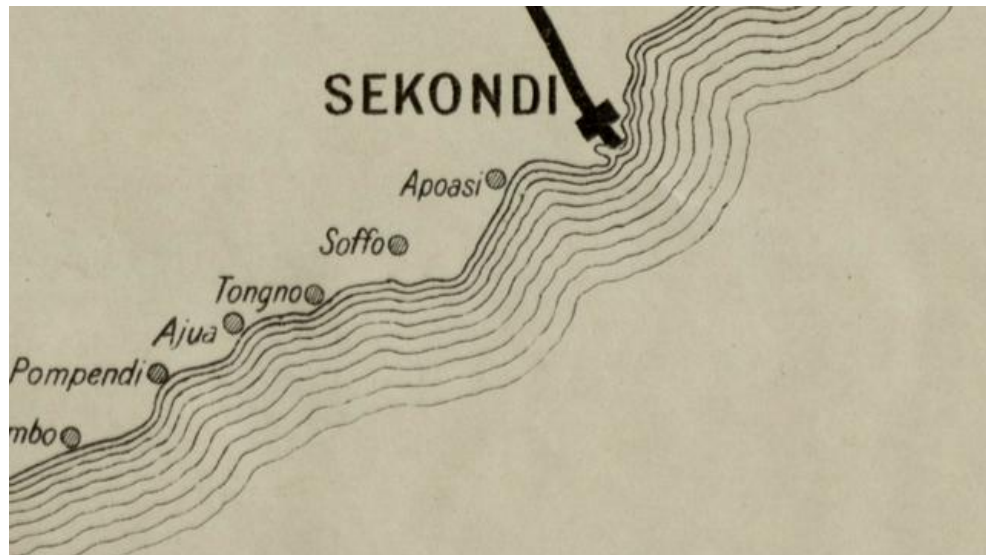


Image 27. Zachary Formwalt, *A Projective Geometry* (2012)

Single-channel HD video with sound; video still courtesy of the artist.

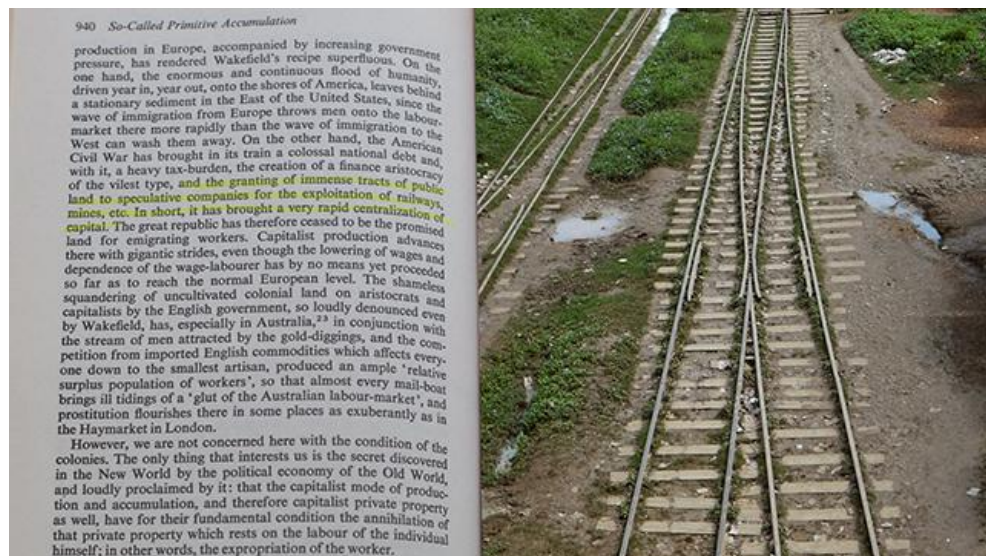


Image 28. Idem

Formwalt's film claims to be a critical inquiry into the spectre of colonialism and its failure through an exploration of two railway tracks in Ghana, a territory that was previously known as the Gold Coast, a remnant of British colonial history. These railway tracks were originally built to connect the goldmines run by British-owned companies. In his film, Formwalt combines sequences filmed on the sites (such as shots from the actual railroads, which have now been partially turned into footpaths) short conversations with his driver and information on the site gathered from the National Archives in Accra, including maps, correspondence and documents from the colonial companies. In addition, the last chapter of Marx's *Capital* appears in the film in images, as an interruption, reflecting on Marx's position on colonialism as a form of capitalism, as enforced exploitation. In Formwalt's inquiry, it also serves as a commentary on the social situation of the site and its current state of failure and desolation. Formwalt could be understood as investigating modes of utilising knowledge by critically and deliberately situating himself as a commentator and literally projecting distance-gathered information (i.e. not based on personal experience or exchange) upon the site. In my opinion, he does this in order to ethically to critique his own position and that of other artists working with diverse modes of nomadism. It is specifically through this criticality that Formwalt touches on difficulties entangled in nomadism and its subjectivities. Rather than solely superimposing information upon the sites of his inquiry, he is successfully intermingling experiences of distance and detachment with nearness and empathy.

Moving on to the experience of materiality in my installation, the idea of invisible materiality inside the pillows and their odour, the dirt and decay imaginarily related to the graveyards, seemed to have evoked feelings and ideas of repulsion, fear of contagion and dirt-avoidance in the viewers. Some viewers told me that they were simply afraid of damaging their clothes, that the pillows might leak dirty moisture or dust. At the same time the viewers commented on experiencing a feeling of harmony after sitting on the pillows for a while. As the materiality inside the pillows – soil, dirt, tree bark and tea – suggested the polluted, possibly infected materiality of the graveyards, discussion between me and some artists in the audience ensued (Amsterdam, opening at Gallery Lumen Travo 25.10.2012). This discussion led to the spatial logistics of infectious diseases such as SARS, Ebola and bird flu, which also traverse geographic distances, incubating, embedded in people or materiality. We discussed was how the materiality provoked the idea of its being contaminated and contagious. This might have placed the process of abjection within the paradigm of contagious diseases. Those of the other that are as able to become inclusive; the body of the other, that of an alien –viral or cultural – that in this way might become connected to us all. Might the dynamics of Ebola, SARS or any kind of virulence and

contamination be relevant as a parallel notion to processes of abjection; for example, in relation to systems and phenomena such as pollution, global exploitation of the planet or extremist religion? Like virulence, the myriad problems caused by pollution might not be pinpointed solely on the location of propagation, because of its dynamics, spatial logics, travels and processes of inclusion and exclusion: its affect. Like viruses, ideologies, technologies and material conditions traverse and contaminate; they nest in their respective host and became one with them. Might this reconfiguration suggest a coactive view of the subject that is not only based on essentialist ideas of indigenous culture, but operates across boundaries of knowledge and geography? For example, by opening up interrelations between the processes of abjection and affect with concepts such as contamination, plasticity, virulence? I am exploring how the processes of abjection might merge with those of becoming. Simultaneously, a new interrelation between the site or the location of origin and the exhibition space might now be established. Might the possibility of being infected by disease or death, by the substances inside the pillows, become an inclusive process, through which the mechanisms of abjection might reflect simultaneously on systems of globalisation and how they might penetrate our lives, no matter where we are?

As an example, similar dynamics were explored by Hong Kong based art space Para-Site in their major exhibition *A Journal of the Plague Year. Fear, ghosts, rebels. SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong story* (2013)<sup>40</sup> (a year after my exhibition in Amsterdam). In this exhibition, Cosmin Costinas and Inti Guerrero investigated the relationship between the local histories of colonisation and that between the Mainland Chinese and the people of Hong Kong and their identity, via diverse archival material and works by different artists. Infectious epidemics were used as a parallel notion to the politics of xenophobia, abjection and hate, not only between Hong Kong and Mainland China but also between Asia, as the point of origin of the epidemics, and the rest of the globe.

While it was clear that the content of the pillows in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) did not originate in the actual site, in this sense, the installation suggest the potential of containing substances of the actual remains and hence the possibility of being infected. As such this industrial materiality, (e.g. soil from a local depot or tree bark from a garden centre) awakened both fear of contagion and a desire for dirt-avoidance in the viewer. In the Chinese context, the materiality also aroused vivid animistic experiences of the presence of spirits in the space, through which the experience of abjection was connected to fear and cultural practices.

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<sup>40</sup> Press release in Appendix B.

At exhibition in Shantou Festival for Public Art (2013), a Mainland Chinese professor told me that in the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), he could see spirits around the pillows. He told me that he wanted to sit down and also do a ritual, but preferred to wait until he was sure that this would not anger the spirits. Afterwards, several other viewers also informed me of having had similar experiences. There was fear respect and hesitation involved, among individual viewers from all social positions and from both within and outside, the field of arts but also among small children. "My children are very excited", said another viewer. "They think that the pillows are very beautiful and want to go to play and jump on them, but they are afraid of the spirits they see around the pillows". These experiences could be reflected on as a cultural positioning. However, rather than a hallucination, these experiences were understood as grounded intersubjective mediation between subjects and objects or animistic experience which might be grounded in ethicality.

Reflecting on the taboo surrounding all things related to death, artist and curator Ma Yongfeng (2015) *Outside the Law and on Tao- Informal discussion with Author* [Transcript in possession of author] 25.1.2015, Iowa community, Beijing, commented that unlike most people in China, the Taoists were not afraid of death, but rather intrigued by it and studied it carefully, in order to use this knowledge in their science of alchemic transmutations. In his view, for example through the reconfigured and transformative relationship between the tomb pillows and the materials such as ash, this work might be directly connected to Taoist thinking in which notions such as self-organisation of matter, the relationality of beings and the cosmic continuum are central. In my opinion, this configuration might suggest that an entanglement between matter and meaning in an artwork; one that explores how the transformative potential of materials might reflect both societal and political structures surrounding us, while simultaneously connecting the otherworldly as an active agent. Thus, it might present a union between the material, the secular, the spiritual and the political, and through this might become an ethical relation.

In Chongqing (artist talk on my exhibition *Resistance and Prayer*, Organhaus, March 2013), some viewers saw the pillows as a practical solution to the problem of where and how to keep the remains after the graveyards were demolished. One could collect the remains inside a pillow, which you could use as a prayer pillow but also carry with you when you relocate. They turned the pillows into a kind of suitcase grave, not unlike an urn, but which would also contain elements of the location<sup>41</sup> where the person was originally buried. This suitcase grave could move conveniently and migrate together with the relatives of the departed. In my view, these statements also represent

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<sup>41</sup> According to Chinese customs, it is important that a person is buried in their home town.

socio-political criticism, not only of the authorities that allow the destruction of these holy cultural practices, but also of the human as a species: how carelessly we humans go about our cultural heritage and pollute our environment.

Thus, in the Chinese context, the process of abjection was not so much fixated on dirt, its avoidance or the individual ego. According to artists Yu Bogong and Megumi Shimizu (Qingshui.Huimei) *Informal discussion with Author* [Recording in possession of author] 06.1.2015, Iowa community, Beijing, the processes of abjection were embedded in, for example, disrespect for the dead, which I have expressed through the photographs in which the graves were untended, covered and surrounded by rubbish and filth, and located next to the village landfill or among the rubble after demolition. Hereby, the processes of abjection might be situated in the public rather than the individual egocentric realm. On the other hand, here the processes of abjection might be much more complex, less a psychoanalytical individualised danger of shift between the subject and the object than a fear embedded in the local understanding of materiality, cultural taboos and the absence of mind-body and culture-nature dichotomies. In relation to my aims and research questions, as a reading of my artwork, this might be seen as deviating from or 'decolonising' the Eurocentric proposition of the process of abjection and tangling with other processes; thus, in interrelation with the other, as merging with the processes of becoming.

Ethically, many viewers commented on the respect with which I had approached this sensitive subject. I believe this was specifically due to the method of working and being with, the intersubjectivity and the empathetic proximity that enabled me to achieve this. Art writer and editor-in-chief Cristina Sanchez-Kozyreva stated of *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) that my approach echoed "almost submissive cultural curiosity" (Pipeline Magazine 2013, p. 38), reflecting the way this methodology replaces the ego of the artist in favour of the content of the work – for instance my allowing the taxi driver to take over. She also pointed out that reflecting on the site from a non-essentialist or hyper-politicised position and from a close human dimension, and contextualising the site of propagation as marginal space or condition of globalisation, included us all, human and non-human, regardless of the location where the installation was shown.

Art writer and editor Lu Xia (Hi Art 21.4.2016) reflected on this curiosity and collaborative mode of working as "heart-warming respect for individual life".

How could the dissected everyday imagery of *One Hundred Ten Thousand*, (2011-12) and the cultural details negotiated into a presentation of it, without implementing parallel Western narratives, be experienced or understood by the viewer at exhibitions in locations other than the site of production? On the other hand, *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) could be approached via



local-global dichotomy. Theorist and curator Mika Hannula (2014) *Talking Through and Thinking* [Interview via Email. In possession of author] 5.10-.2.12.2014, related to the installation via the politics of recognition. Hannula traced the experience of the installation back to Hegel's construction of the general and the particular:

For Hegel, in a simplified form, it went like this: in any relationship, you have the personal, the private, the local part, and you have the other side, which is then labelled as common, general, official, global etc. The question is how to make the connection– and how to make and achieve it so that each side has an effect on each other. For Hegel, the connection is there only when the personal is articulated so that it becomes specific – that there is something extra, something new, something different in the current version of the personal. This is part one, so to say. Part two requires that this personal and specific content is articulated so that it opens up to the 'commons', to the others – so that it can be understood and shaped by those who are interested in the given issues and matters.

Hannula 2014, part II, pp. 16-17

Building on this oppositional argument, he pointed out that “people tend to feel more connected to things and surroundings when they feel they can personally influence it”. Yet, in this context, I argue that this constructed emotional and ethical distance does not take into account the global powers that co-sustain the conditions of the villages and graveyards in question; the myriad forms of worldwide violence that the accelerated capitalist system inflicts upon us all (human and non-human) and through which we all are implicated in these processes. Approaching such a condition solely via the politics of recognition, on the other hand, might be an underestimation these powers' effect localities and an overestimation of the influence that an individual still can exert on his direct surroundings within our contemporary reality. As such, locality's potential for relationality might be limited to the very anthropocentric and individualised positioning which I challenge.

Such 'othering' based on geolocation and possibly on cultural details, which the installation might treat as belonging to the other (e.g. the specific use of Taoist prayer pillows) excludes perception of the dimensions and potentialities of materialism, posthuman subjectivity, of the non/in-human subjectivity and agency. Furthermore, such a localised and essentialist position might not reflect how the current state of our planet, through human capitalist exploitation of its resources and of each other, has enabled or forced us to rethink our position within the Earth and planetary systems in more fluid connections, between the human and its others. In this way,

individualised positioning might not be understood, rather than as producing difference, which it claims to do, but as exclusive and remote from Life. According to Braidotti:

... the relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all non-anthropocentric elements. Living matter – including the flesh – intelligent and self-organising but it is precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic Life. 'Life', far from being codified as the exclusive property or unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralised as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open ended. This vital approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for anthropos, that is to say bios, and the wider scope of animal and nonhuman life also known as zoe.

Braidotti 2012, p: 60.

Thus, *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) might necessitate delving beneath the undercurrents of contemporary reality and affirmation of contemporary vitalism, monistic philosophy and spirituality; and from this embodied position, the installation might be understood and experienced as producing inclusivity and mutuality.

In allowing for more interconnective ways of thinking, artist and curator Alessandro Rolandi (2015) *Outside the Law and on Tao Informal discussion with Author* [Transcript in possession of author] 25.1.2015, Iowa community, Beijing considered the condition of the graveyards through an imagined parallel lens in the developed and organised West. He suggests that such conditions could be found in some kind of isolated and singular rural situation or in an illegal refugee camp. This speculation evoked connections to the law (or rather with that which is the outcast, the abject, in regard to the law). In my view, this conjunction between the legal and the spatial might reflect the contrast between the dynamics of processes of marginalisation, global economics and their ethical affects. This might shift the focus from marginalised, individual persons (the abjected) or from the psychoanalytical, personalised relationship with the marginal (the abject), to the process of marginalisation itself, through which marginalisation might operate as a parallel notion to the process of becoming abject.

## 1.9. Findings

So where are we now? In Section 1, I have explored the potential of process-oriented, political nomadic positioning, empathetic approaches, embodiment and proximity as vehicles for the production of artworks. To remind the viewer, I repeat my research questions here.

- How are nomadic politics, extensive lived experience, local knowledge and different levels of collaboration incorporated in my artworks and how to communicate these processes to the viewer?
- How might my installations propose a more expansive account of abjection allowing for a new kind of agency beyond the limited notions of psychoanalytical and Eurocentric positioning of Subjects and Objects? I expand these questions through a consideration of Deleuze's notion of 'becoming', animism and nomadic modes of temporality and location within my artworks.
- What kinds of union between meaning and material might this generate? And how might they be propagated beyond the sites and places (of origin), across cultural geographies and into other realms? What kind of ethical implications might all of this entail and generate?
- What possibilities for transformative, inclusive and intersubjective relations between human(s) and their others can be developed in my artworks, using this conceptual approach?

The key aims I set for myself are:

- To consider the encounter between author, viewer, artwork, context(s) and the (human) subject's relationship to the materiality of my artworks.
  - To examine how the experience of the artwork has agency in transforming these aforementioned relations.
- What possibilities for transformative, inclusive and intersubjective relations among humans and their others can be developed in my artworks, using this conceptual approach?

In Section 1, I have intended that interaction with the local people on the site via the adapted method of free indirect discourse, working and being with, and the empathetic proximity to the local situation would interconnect the viewers' subjectivity with that of the others (non-human). I have proposed to create a space in which meaning and material might merge, produce multi-

vocality and generate intersubjectivity and ethicality. I have explored how the processes of abjection, embedded in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), might be much more complex; less a psychoanalytical individualised shift between the human subject and the object than a relational, ethical and temporal agency.

In *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), I examined how to offer the audience the possibility of processual thinking; how this generative and active mode of viewing might enable the possibility of unions between meaning and materiality, how they might propagate beyond the context and the site of origin, and the ethical relations which this might produce. Through this expansion of relations, I aimed to evoke systems of relations that might shift the dynamics of psychoanalytical understanding of the processes of abjection between the self and the other through merging with becomings, to operate as inclusive of the other. I have done this, for example, by intertwining the processes of abjection in conjunction with interrelated and generative processes such as pollution and contamination and in integrated encounters with the otherworldly, as well as with animism and globalisation.

Through similar reconfigurations, the dualisms involved in resistance to processes might have turned towards ourselves, rather than towards another. That is to say, rather than polarising the relation to it, the process of resistance might operate as inclusive of the other, for instance by positioning the viewer as involved and implicated in the production of possible futures and future-pasts.

The viewer was led to reconfigure and negotiate relations between subjects and objects through artwork that performed multi-voiced and socially mediated dialogue expressing different subject positions, grounded in local subjectivities and conditions. Through the processual mode of encountering the artwork, most viewers experienced the slowness of viewing and the presentation of research processes as tools for a more open approach. Due to the slowness of the process, they could refrain from forming immediate conclusions; they felt they had more space and new avenues for independent thinking. Thus, instead of solely projecting their individual psycho-social or political legacy on the installation, or relating to the 'other' places and lifeworlds through regulated ideas formed by and adopted from the media, which would just echo back the viewer's own understanding, the viewer could take their time and engage in the process of (re)configuration of potential relations. In this sense, the taken distance of the site and the subject, and the extensive investment in time, as well in viewing the research processes, actually – maybe somewhat paradoxically – created nearness and openness for both viewer and author for processes of inclusion of the other, whether human or non/in-human. This might have exposed concepts of otherness and dualisms as outdated hierarchies and systems of exclusion.

At first sight, the installation *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) was often experienced in China as reflecting the otherworldly (spiritual or spectral). In the West; the political, transformative potential of materiality and the specific condition on which the installation is based. This might articulate unions of multiplicities. It might also reconfigure the complexities of the connectedness between the human and non-human, and between different in-human realms. The way the installation is presented and structured, incorporating materials, processes and spatialities, might propose mediations simultaneously inside and outside the socio-political, cultural and global scope, and at the same time within the realm of the singular body. *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) seeks to offer the potential to reconfigure relations between subjects and objects via animistic mediation, as well as via an affirmative approach to the potential of post-human subjectivity.

*One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) aims to challenge the relation to and understanding of abjection in respect to animism, to societal structures and politics, and to materiality in the subject-object relationship. By participating or performing a ritual, as suggested in *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), or by actively relating to the ethical and material side of the work and engaging with its process, the installation might propose a shift away from and resistance; though which, for instance, the supernatural might not have been experienced or understood as psychological and imaginary. As such the supernatural might not operate as an abject hallucination. Rather, *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) might open up active potential for mediators, for subjects other-than-human (material and immaterial); they might become operative as active and inclusive agents within the installation. Doing so they might create potentials for the merging of matter, meanings and ethics through which more inclusive (inter)subjectivity might emerge.

In Section 2, I will be concerned to investigate how these processes and reconfigurations might operate when approaching multiple sites and different conditions at once. I move on from exploring sites directly related to death in relation to the transformations of the human body, with the direct implication of the human subject, even be it spectral, to examining the potential of sites of fossil fuel – specially coal. I do this in order to expand my inquiry to examine globalisation and global capitalism, through its effect on earth systems and the marginalised. I shift contexts in order to challenge further the oppositional Western positioning between subjects and objects. Furthermore, I move from questions of still images to moving ones. What possibilities might the moving image offer to push this research further? How could this medium be used to explore the subject-object relationship outside the realm of language, which is crucial to Kristeva's theory on abjection and the formation of the subject in Western psychoanalytic theorising; for example, by utilising only the sounds of the environment? I lose the use of spoken language, which

was examined in Section 1 by using the adapted method of free-indirect discourse in order to challenge the 'I' voice. Instead, I address non-human subjectivities in their own voice and return to questions of materiality, energy and life to nature-culture, life-death and cosmic continuums.



Image 29. Close-up of a coal ball on a studio floor  
Hand-rolled by a resident of Caochangdi village.

## Section 2. On approaching the ‘Coalworks’: Installations *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013)

### 2.1. Encounters – about objects and subjects

In this section, I discuss the research questions and aims involved in the making of two artworks, the four-channel HD video installation *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and the installation of objects – hand-rolled coal balls and billiard cues – *Blackballing* (2013). The reason I include these in one section is that they both developed from the same context, or rather object, an encounter with a row of small hand-rolled balls of coal on a street in Caochangdi village. This context opened a unique opportunity to research and reflect on the liminal edge of the coal industry, life at the margins of our damaged planet during what has generally become known as the Anthropocene era. Yet, because of the specific context of my research (marginality and fossil fuel), I need to mention the mounting antagonism towards the naming of this new era. For example, TJ Demos (2015) argues:

The Anthropocene thesis tends to support such developmental globalisation, joining all humans together in shared responsibility for creating our present environmental disaster. Exploiting further its universalising logic, the Anthropocene concept makes it easy to justify further technological interventions in the Earth’s systems via geo-engineering, as if the causes of climate disruption can be its solutions. In such narratives as these, anthropos distracts attention from the economic class that has long benefitted from the economic system responsible for catastrophic environmental change.

Demos, blog post 2015.

According to Braidotti, Anthropocene is affirmative towards “trans-species embrace based on the awareness of the impending catastrophe: the environmental crisis and the global warming issue, not to speak of the militarisation of space, reduce all species to a comparable degree of vulnerability” (Braidotti 2013, p. 85). Thus, in this sense, Demos’s argument is limited to the socio-economic dimension, the Capitalocene and the current; thus, it does not reflect on possible futures as Braidotti does. For example,

here in China, the rise of developmental capitalism with monopoly over economic and political resources is emerging hand in hand with the leviathan increase of state power, leaving most, not only marginalised citizens, feeling vulnerable (Qi Zhu 2016). At this stage of this thesis, I use the naming of the current epoch 'Anthropocene' in recognition of the ethical problem that moniker proposes, as well as acknowledging that the vocabulary governing post-human discourse is at a developmental stage. Further, I am not solely looking into the human condition but aiming to include the non-human. Rather than utilise the non-human turn simply as a potential mode of arbitrarily de-centring the human, which might lead to colonising and totalising the other, I examine, interrupt and critique these developments. Would it be possible to oppose the idea of the human as ontologically superior to the non-human and exceptional, while simultaneously exploring the possibility that humans and non-humans can be both unified and different? I will return to these questions at a later stage.

My intention is to expand my research into environmental issues, and continue and deepen my reflections in relation to necropolitics and energy, reflecting on continuums addressed in Section 1. I do this in order to further address my research questions about intersubjective relationships between the human and the non/in-human in relation to temporality. Moving on from the questions in Section 1, in which I investigated sites and conditions directly related to death, via the implied human body (even the spectral) and the human subject, I address inorganic material in relation to life, the otherworldly, and into death or toxicity in life. Coal is a fossil: that is to say, it represents the final stage of a natural process of transmutation, from dead plant matter to peat to lignite to sub-bituminous coal. Due to human exploitation of this fossil, it also operates as spectral and as material, and affects our everyday conditions – as pollutant, as part of our body and as an economic medium of power relations. I find it necessary to enlarge the scale of this research, from the particular sites and personal and otherworldly experiences to the affect we humans have on our environment. This is in order to examine the potential for interdependencies between the human and non/in-human and inequalities and marginalisation this inquiry could enable. How might this transform, in an artwork, the relationship between the processes of exclusion and inclusion? What kinds of resistance and/or relational mutuality and union might this produce? And what might be the ethical implications? Thus, I intend to reflect on a planetary scale as well as to continuing to oppose dualisms (e.g. the Self and the Other) and shift between the secular and the spiritual in relation to nature-culture and life-death continuums, as well as the tensions this (inquiry) might create.

I started these 'coal' projects by asking the villagers about the status and purpose of these coal balls. What were these curious balls and what were



they used for? How were they made, and by whom and why? The villagers told me that they are the residue, the crumbs and the dust of the coal piles that the residents sweep together and pulverise in order to use every last bit of this costly fossil fuel. Each compound or resident buys their own coal. Even the residue from the piles is considered as someone's property and is not a free waste product.

This residue is a mixed substance consisting of:

Two parts residue from a coal pile

One part (polluted) soil

and

One part (polluted) water.

This toxic 'dough' is then rolled into balls, much like the act of rolling snowballs. When the balls are dry, they can be used for heating or cooking.<sup>42</sup>

These slightly irregular black coal balls made me think of some kind of 'anti-snowball', and they moved me very deeply. They seemed to contain a whole universe within them and a multitude of simultaneous contradictions, and present a dynamic tension and union between materiality and meaning. While referring to the general damage coal does to our planet's ecosystem, and the Earth itself, it appeared to me that the villagers shifted their focus to the inequalities between consumers, from the centres to the margins. The global poor are the ones who probably contribute the least to climate change<sup>43</sup> by using coal; they are also the ones who risk the greatest physical damage. Their bodies come in direct contact with this pollutant, not only through working the mines, providing the global capitalist industry with fuel for its production for the consumerist world, but also in their very homes and daily living environment.

During the winter, coal is omnipresent in the migrant worker villages of Beijing; one continually inhales the black, toxic smoke of the burning coal; coal dust is everywhere, covering all surfaces, your clothes, penetrating your computer and your body, and huge coal piles are to be found in the yards of each compound as well as at street corners. The toxic smoke penetrates our lungs and dirties our skin, clothes and environment. Everywhere, black-faced and black-handed workers transport coal in their vehicles, filling the deposits. In suburban villages, there is often a central furnace system<sup>44</sup> that operates on coal, but people also use makeshift furnaces and stoves for cooking, which may be placed inside the family home. Coal is an inseparable part of our daily life. How might an artwork reflect on how economic systems govern individual health? I will return to this question at a later stage.

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<sup>42</sup> Here I need to mention that the rolling of the coal balls is not an activity that one encounters in every street corner or on a massive scale.

<sup>43</sup> Naturally, there are certain tribes who do not participate in this particular eco-catastrophe in any way.

<sup>44</sup> Also, my own studio is heated with coal, but the 'central heating' of my compound (the worker Tang Shifu), just like the workers of all the compounds, will go to sleep around 9 p.m., which leaves the studio and living spaces cold during night time.

This coal ball, and the context it presents, continued to challenge my inquiry into modes of resistance. In this context, the resistance might not be solely directed and dissected by the global debate on climate change and inequalities contributing to global warming based, for instance, on a nation-state in the global north or south, or China being a major producer of pollution by coal. Within this research, I explore the potential for resistance that, instead of being pointed towards the other, might turn towards ourselves. I am concerned to address how resistance might operate in the context of inequalities between consumers – one in the village and the other global (consuming the products co-produced with the labour of the villager). By reflecting on the marginal, would it be possible, to include the viewer in a global context? The burden of responsibility, the amount of coal used in production processes and the pollution generated are not equal between corporate industry and the individual human consumer, not to mention the non-humans (all our co-beings and things on Earth, whether they are consumers or not). As such, might not this relationship be defined as one between the producers, products and victims? And in that case, how does one decide who the victim is and to scale the level of victimhood? Perhaps one could use the term ‘innocent victim’, referring to those few humans who live their lives outside the capitalist system, and the non-human. Victimhood could be seen as connected to vulnerability. What I am interested in exploring is a mode of resistance which might somehow, while living life under the destruction of advanced global capitalism, forge a “pan-human bond of vulnerability” as a response to our shared planetary catastrophe (Braidotti 2013, p. 63). This would not necessarily be undertaken solely by highlighting the scale of the quilt, ontological or economical, but also by recognising the different levels of involvement in the destruction. I do think that it is necessary to acknowledge that, as beings among other beings we humans have failed ourselves and all our others. Thus, I question how such a bond of vulnerability, expressed in artworks, might generate means or methods for us humans to work towards new propositions for subjectivity and towards a new way of being. Could this operate as a process of inclusion of the other, not as totalising and assimilating but operative as an ethical and material agency? Could this bond be extended to include the non/in-human? And would it offer space for difference? Could it generate grounds for alternative modes of being together that are based on sharing (for instance the planet and its resources, the cosmos) which might generate greater equality and affirmation of life in the future? How might an artwork generatively reflect and perform such modes of resistance?

The balls, in themselves, as well the act of rolling them, seemed to me to contain a multitude of interrelations. For example, the paradox of that very thing: the coal ball, which keeps one alive by providing warmth and enabling

cooking is actually, as pollutant, killing one, alongside all living beings. Reflecting on the act of rolling the coal balls and the mixing of the differences (coal, soil and water), I started contemplating possible reconfigurations, such as the spatial, socio-political, environmental and material conditions that might emerge from and be related to this raw material, the ritual and the context. The ball in itself, qua form, could be seen as reflecting the Earth or other planets, just as the act of rolling could be seen as an allegory of the motion of the planets circling around the sun in our solar system. How might this materiality build interconnections between a multitude of realms, including the social, the political, the material and the otherworldly? How would the ball roll, across different realms, contexts, sites and places? Could one's being-in-the-world intermingle with being an integral-part-of-the-earth? The importance of these questions in relation to my PhD project lies in their potential to open up new contexts for reconfiguration of subject-object relationships (human and non-human) in my work, as inclusive and interdependent. Could this inclusivity still be expressed and understood as heterogeneous? And what are the ethical implications?



Image 30. Pile of coal balls, dry and freshly rolled, Caochangdi, Beijing 2013



Image 31. Worker shovelling coal, Iowa Community, Caohangdi 2014.





Image 32. Central heating, Tang Shifu, shovelling coal to the furnace, Iowa Community 2014



Image 33. View from my studio door  
Piles of coal, a coal-burning furnace and my neighbour's self-made, fresh sausages drying in the sun, Iowa Community, Caohangdi village, Beijing 2014



Image 34. Coal reserves at the CCD 300 compound courtyard, Caochangdi, Beijing 2014



Image 35. Close-up of the previous

## 2.2. Circular movements

I asked my assistant Yueyue for some of these balls and she hired her parents' neighbour to produce them. I wanted to have the coal balls close to me, to live with them and examine them. I moved to the concept of the act of rolling these toxic balls. I engaged a resident of my compound, Qing Shifu,<sup>45</sup> who was willing to perform this act for the camera. As this performance was considered a job, we agreed on payment. Together, we set the stage with a pile of coal residue – coal dust and crumbs – and a bucket of water in the yard of our compound, not far from the coal piles. Qing Shifu started rolling the balls, every now and then adding more (polluted) water to the mixture of coal and (polluted) soil. She was clothed in a traditional army coat<sup>46</sup> and fur hat with ear warmers, a traditional unisex uniform worn by many workers all over China.<sup>47</sup>

I set the camera close by and started experimenting with fixed-frame shots, from different distances. Some frames included the environment, placing the performer in the context of the compound, while others were close-ups showing only her hands and the ball she was rolling. I also experimented with narrative shots, which included the entrance and exit of the performer/worker on the site.

In the video, the dirty hands of the worker are seen carefully rolling one ball after another, as once in a while she adds water to the mixture. The repetitive ritual is calm and meditative. None of the balls are identical.

If we think about repetition in terms of Deleuze's concept of 'eternal return' and the inherent connection to time, it is not a cycle of habit, not even on the cosmic level: "The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many ..." (Deleuze 1994, p. 126).

In this sense, repetition is becoming as it is: affirming difference.

Thus, while the image could be seen as captivating us, since we are capable of repeating the act of rolling a ball, this repetition also becomes a context for multiple transformative relationships. I am keen to explore how this mechanical action in itself might propose generative interrelations of differences and, in this way, transcend both the material properties of the coal and the action in itself from their context and the locality of materiality, and open up new connections with other realms, new futures, which could possibly operate as spaces of becoming and connections to Deleuzian

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<sup>45</sup> The title 'shifu' is a respectful way of addressing a worker (gongren). It literally means 'a master', 'a craftsman', 'a skilled labourer.' Please note that the use of these terms varies between the north and the south of China.

<sup>46</sup> The coat in the image is the modern version, used by the People's Liberation Army, the armed forces of PCR under the leadership of the Communist Party. The PLA winter coat, with variations, dates back to the whole of the last century. Nowadays, next to military use, it is common wear among civilians, especially workers, as it is warm, rain resistant and very cheap.

<sup>47</sup> Army uniforms in general; this is the 'cold weather' variation of the outfit.

monistic ontology. As Braidotti says: “becomings are un-programmed as mutations, disruptions, and points of resistance. Their time frame is always the future anterior, that is to say a linkage across present and past in the act of constructing and actualising possible futures” (Braidotti 2006, p. 137). I was keen to explore the manifold possibilities of these matter-energy flows (expressed in the videos) and how these might become entangled with relational unions between meaning and material, the mind and the body, and the embedded intersubjectivity, ethicality and temporality in the action.





Image 36. Qing Shifu rolling balls from the leftover crumbs and dust of a coal pile, swept together

One of the compound dogs was very curious about our project (she ended up featuring in many shots in the final work). Shots on the site during filming. Beijing Iowa compound, February 2013.



Image 37. Qing Shifu concentrating on the ball rolling act about to start



Image 38. Qing Shifu taking a break from the coal ball rolling



Image 39. Close-up of some coal balls



By thinking through the conjunction of this ritual and its materiality, the act evoked a set of provocative associations in me. I started thinking of them (the ritual, the materiality and the coal ball) in terms of allegorical potentials that I felt could not be ignored. I decided to start filming that which is left out, or cannot be said: the hidden connections (material and imaginary). My intention was to explore how this coal ball might transform the process of abjection to function as a catalyst or allegory in relation to and exploration of larger cultural, social or global phenomena.

In order to examine these questions, I continued to film fragments from the environment, the village and its surroundings, aiming to reflect on and document the omnipresence of coal. To me the use of fragments could generate both political and spiritual connotations (political as in the sense of critical engagement with a fragmented world, spiritual with fragmented body). Yet the aim of this fragmentation is to eventually transcend the post-modern meaning of chaos; to explore how they (the fragments) might act as critical ruptures while simultaneously generating a fluid body of interdependencies between differences through unions of materialities and meanings. Life in the village soon made me extend the coal to the environment; to subjects such as workers driving home in their trucks, close-ups of coal- polluted soil, shots of non-human expressivity such as the movements of (coal) polluted plastic in the wind in the front of the coal manufacturing plant, smoke from a factory pipe, and a brick of coal in a pool of water. Furthermore, I was exploring how the spectres might not discriminate between the mind and the body and how the nature-culture/death-life and cosmic continuums are embed in these relations (between contexts and images). I will return to and elaborate on these fragments via images at a later stage.

Thus, the coal balls and the act of rolling them might became transformative, as well as political and ethical entities, which in turn might open up new contexts generating systems of relations that do not assign meaning to the coal ball or the sites and places I filmed in themselves but reflect their relationality. How might the coal ball act as a measurement of or catalyst for the intensities of ruptures involved in the production of these shifts and movements between the different contexts? How could I produce a project which simultaneously mediates and embodies the conditions and reconfigurations that emerged from this materiality, the coal ball? How to embed these specific socio-political conditions into an artwork which would situate them not only in conjunction with the processes of global capitalism, thereby building on the argument in Section 1? How to reflect on these marginal conditions on a material, environmental and cosmic scale? Minor<sup>48</sup> histories and non-heroic gestures tend to disappear over time and do not

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<sup>48</sup> Minor in the sense of Deleuze (1980); minor as defined by identities, as molar configurations of the majoritarian state machine.

travel, in themselves, across geographies. My concern is how to weave these actions into an artwork that would not only document realities, but also organise and weave together complexities that emerge from this simple gesture. And how can I keep this gesture generative, rather than capture it, in order to allow generative shifts which might implicate the viewer (as well as the author)?<sup>49</sup>

The rituals of burning coal, the smog in the village, the smog from the factory pipes and the very low score recorded by the Beijing Air Pollution Real-time Air Quality Index (AQI) during the winter months made me think about another kind of ritual which produces smoke: that of incense burning in the temples. This connection was interesting for me because of the way it might allow direct association with other realms and mutuality, an inclusive relationship between the mind and the body: the coal ball as not human but still a connected entity- toxic smoke as healing element. This way, the meaning and interconnections might navigate to imaginative territories or realms which are not controlled by humans and do not exist for the purpose of human understanding.

I started visiting temples in Beijing but encountered a problem: all the sites of worship here in the capital are constantly crowded with tourists. As such, it would be impossible to film something without including these random people in the shots. Coincidentally, I was to participate in a residency in Organhaus, Chongqing, Central China at that time (March 2013). Maybe there would be less tourism there?

In Chongqing, my local assistant Li Xinshui from Organhaus, introduced me to a small, forgotten Buddhist temple called 'Dragon and Phoenix', further from the city centre on the Yangtze riverbank. It was perfect, as only a handful of people attend the temple each day. The backdrop on the other side of the river, a contrasting view of the hypermodern Chongqing skyline of skyscrapers, added to the contrast.

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<sup>49</sup> Moving on to the concept of becoming 'minoritarians', in order to avoid becoming Fascist (Deleuze 1980). As ethical action of being affected and implicated (the author as well as the viewer) by and into these marginal conditions (of the villages),



Image 40. Photographic sketch for the video. Dragon and Phoenix, Chongqing 2013



Image 41. Head monk preparing for a ceremony at Dragon and Phoenix Research video still from another project, Chongqing 2013

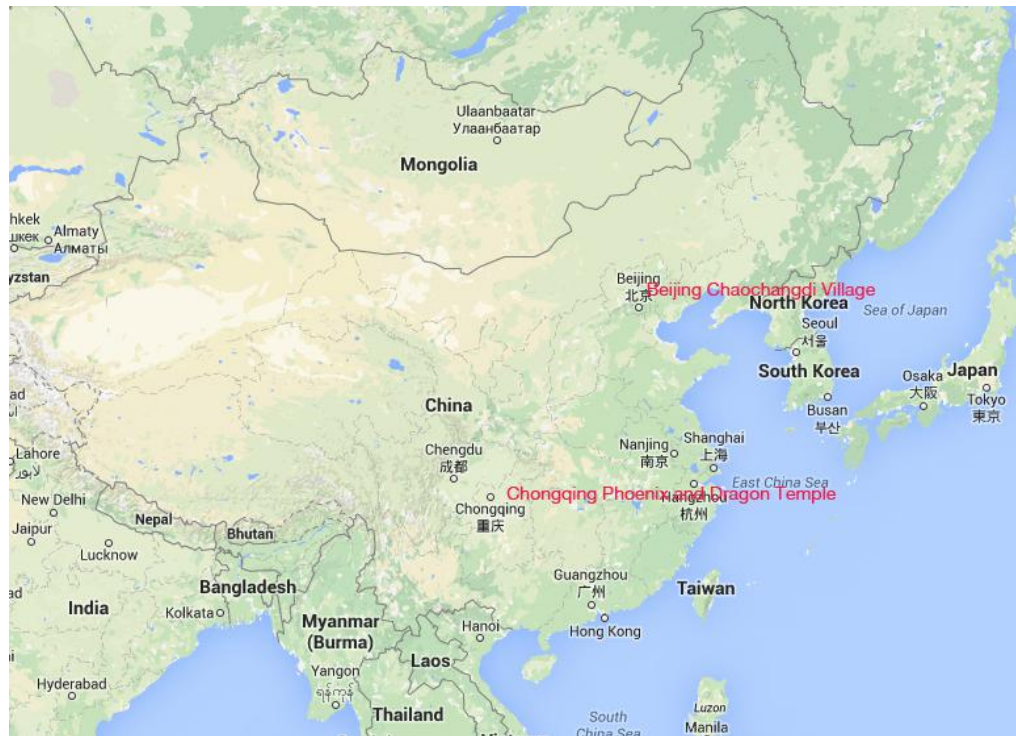


Image 42. Map locating Chongqing in China and in relation to Beijing



Image 43. View on Yangtze river, Chongqing 2013

Together with my assistant Li Xinru, I went to the temple and received permission from the head monk to work on my project on the premises, including filming at the Holy Furnaces and the burning of incense in them. At the same time, I was recording the temple sounds and the bells they kept on ringing at apparently random intervals.

While I was filming, unexpectedly, a temple worker started cleaning the Holy Furnace, fully aware that I was filming. He was carefully and securely picking up the stumps of the burnt incense and arranging them in a pile. As he moved slowly and gracefully clockwise in and around the Holy Furnace, I kept filming until he was finished. Then, just as I had started packing my camera, he lit the pile of leftovers; so I unpacked my camera and continued filming. At this stage, I thought that it was a spectacular ending. But then, to my great surprise and amusement, he started burning rubbish, which he had swept from the grounds, in the fire in the Holy Furnace (I will return to this in depth later).

By now, I had several hours of footage with which I aimed to investigate the materiality, holy and unholy, and systems of interdependence between these seemingly incommensurable elements. And what kind of transformations might occur at the sites themselves? Or outside them, in a global art world context, at exhibition spaces, both in and outside China? Would it be possible to somehow reflect on the shifts in the oppositional relationship between the self and the other, via the artwork, while using the cultural details embedded in the videos without reducing the other to sameness? What kinds of unions of the human and its other might this produce in the artwork, and what might the ethical implications be?



## 2.3. Frames, channels and sounds – losing the language

Back in my Beijing studio (at the end of March 2013), I started analysing all the footage in order to develop the artwork in progress.<sup>50</sup> To save time, I skimmed through the hours of footage simultaneously on two or three monitors. Through this practical method, what struck me first was the richness of the acoustic spaces of the fragments; how the sounds, when played simultaneously and merged together started to function rather as iterations of new possible connections. Furthermore, when heard together, the sounds composed a soundscape. I could not directly connect these sounds to their origin (the specific fragment); to me, they evoked more connectivity as well as otherworldly dimensions. Rather than signifying the video fragment they originated from, they mediated indefinite space or rather an experience of such. This first random discovery of the acoustic environments' possibilities for functioning as an autonomous soundscape turned out to be crucial for this artwork, for it was then that I decided to start developing a multichannel installation. I wanted to explore what these soundscapes might be. How can sound operate outside 'language'? Might it produce another meaning? How could I use the soundscapes in order to stress the physicality of materiality and the otherworldly dimension the videos entail, thereby connecting and transforming the viewer's experience? Would it allow me to lose the use of verbal language altogether and yet build a coherent artwork, an installation, a cinematic space, in which these soundscapes would play a prominent role? This question builds further from Section 1, in which I used a modified form of Deleuze's 'free-indirect discourse' in order to generate multiple subject positions and to lose the 'I' voice, the author's subjective vocal input or the 'imposition' of personal reflections upon cultural details. How could I push my exploration towards the question of transforming the relationship between the self and the other further by allowing the different fragments of bodies and subjectivities of differences, human and non-human, in the videos to have their own voice for dynamic and spatial expression? Reflecting on Deleuze's concept of flows as the basis for the formation of the individual,<sup>51</sup> might the use of non-human expressivities – their own voices, their own authority and their generative knowledge-powers – allow me to reconfigure different relationships between subjects and objects? Are not animal and material expressivity and formed materiality (in a Deleuzian sense) a continuum that exists between life expressivity in nature and in expressions of community and solidarity and an

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<sup>50</sup> At this point, the reader, if they have not done so yet, might want to look into the documentation of the work.

<sup>51</sup> Returning to Deleuze's and Guattari's position on and attack on Freud (1972); key role acquisition language plays psychoanalytic theorising.

expressivity of legitimacy? Essentially, specific expressions of life exist within expressions of political legitimacy- for example military messages are included in these forms of communication (De Landa on Deleuze 2007, n.p.). How might the artwork allow the individual (author or the viewer) to become ethically, materially and cosmically included, wherever they may be? Would this allow the viewer to connect with this materiality for instance as animistic mediation and/or as a body unfolding inside from the outside, in the sense of 'body without organs' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987)? I am aiming for this video work to challenge dualisms and polarisations while maintaining a relation to stratified fields of organization,<sup>52</sup> to offer alternative, collective modes of being or experience. That is to say, to maintain a certain reference to their origin, the sites, materiality and contexts of the video fragments, while reflecting the movements and processes of transformation through spatiality and temporality. This process, rather than its outcome, is important to this research project as I am concerned with the construction of and potentials of relational, inclusive and intersubjective interconnections between, for instance, subjects, object and spaces, viewer and artwork, rather than their teleology.

If we think about the westernisation of the world in globalisation, not only postcolonialism, economic regimes and the homogenised aesthetic codes it imposes, it also imposes Christianity and its division between the mind and the body and anthropocentric perspectives. Furthermore, Christianity places a great emphasis on language. Would this losing of human spoken language in my artworks allow for a more inclusive relationship between the self and the other, one that is more connected to the body, rather than subjects? Could it open up a way to explore the processes of abjection situated in more extended fields of relations, outside relations to psychoanalysis and proper language and their and individual subject's closure of interpretation, as in Kristeva (1980)? Could this generate experience and knowledge beyond human control produced by the non-human subjectivities that are included in the installation?

I started to contemplate the documentary turn in visual art, the relationships and tensions between reality and representation, and the tensions between politics and aesthetics, truth and fiction, and transparency and opacity. How could I utilise my extended lived experience of the location, time and timing in which I have produced the imagery? But rather than use this as a form of exposure of the marginalised as such, I wanted to use the transformative capacities of the fragments to propose "political demand for equality and participation that challenges the global system of social inequality and geographic exclusion" (Demos 2013, p. 209). Thus, I started building

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<sup>52</sup> Just reminding the reader; as stated before, stratified not as a linguistic effect but as an ontological demonstration.

narratives from different singular fragments, e.g. close-ups of the environment such as polluted soil, dogs playing on a pile of coal, water and smoke. Elements that might seem contradictory at first sight would form relationships in sound and image. The opacity of the images/generated narratives or interconnections they might generate was crucial to me. Instead of creating an image of some form of public global knowledge, of a intensified reality from which I, as the author, and the viewer would be able to draw conclusions that would be based solely in our own beliefs excluding all other potentials perspectives. I was interested in using cinematic means in combination of local knowledge and the generative potentials of the imagery in order to allow participatory and inclusive relationships to the viewer in a global context, without losing my ethical imperative of a relationship of proximity and empathy.

In my selection of the final footage, I decided to use only fixed-frame shots, long shots and close-ups, rather than moving sequences. I felt that this allowed me to highlight and isolate the specific content of the images and their different contexts. These images would fix the viewer in a stable viewing position from which, through the different imagery and sound fragments in the multiple channels, they would circumnavigate the shifts generated. But unlike, for example, an urban dweller examining shifts in their direct surroundings, would the videos also generate shifts between the locations, the contexts of origin and the exhibition space? My intention was to examine their potential to enable transformations in the relationship between the self and the other, mutuality operating across cultural geographies and between subjects, human and non-human. And, even more importantly, I wished to consider how to avoid losing all political representation and yet, simultaneously, not reduce all subjects to mere biological existence? How might these shifts between contexts in the fragments, such as the rolling of the coal ball and the burning of the incense, and their organisation principles, such as the material, socio-political or spiritual orders, distort and change the processes of abjection which they, in themselves, might trigger in the viewer? My aim was to investigate how distorting of or de-localising viewer orientation might generate new contexts for meaning and unite different and even oppositional conditions. Might these generated systems of interdependency allow for the processes of abjection to operate outside the psychoanalytical (Kristeva), generate relationality to the non/in-human and challenge anthropocentric positioning?

## 2.4. Encounters in the temple

The key elements, the most important footage, that determined and influenced most of my choices were the shots of the coal ball rolling, as well as a video edited from the footage shot in the Chongqing temple. These videos created intimacy, not only through closeness to the workers featured, but also in the visible marking of a normally invisible act. (the cleaning process normally starting in the temple after all visitors have left and the coal ball rolling mostly taking place in the villages). Both videos also provide insight into activities otherwise unseen, or left in oblivion, which are outside institutional ritualising.

Returning to the temple and the encounters there as I mentioned before, my filming of the incense burning inspired the temple worker to perform a normally hidden action, burning rubbish in the Holy Furnace, for the camera. He wanted to make his mark on the video. This uninvited intervention by the worker opened a much deeper context than my original idea of interconnecting the smoke of burning coal and ritual of burning incense: the absurd action opened multi-layered relationships between spirituality and secular and for instance in socio-political and environmental questions.

During the filming, our eyes met several times. I could read the laughter in his as he was fully aware of the transgression his chosen mode of rubbish disposal represented, of the daily absurdity of the moment and of the diverse connotations such actions entail, including the very practicality of it: fire is fire, and even in Holy Fire one can burn rubbish. This act could be understood as a purifying rite, in which the Holy Fire holds the power of cleansing the world of its rubbish, real and metaphorical. In this way, the worker would become a medium, authorised by holding a power to perform this ritual.

Also the act of burning the rubbish in a Holy Vessel can be understood simply as a transgressive and blasphemous mock ritual. As a parallel in Christianity, one could think of washing dishes in the christening font. Via imagination, the ritual could even be connected to practices such as Satanism.

Further, this performance can also be seen as an allegory, reflecting the position of religion within the history of China (or in the world in general) or as merged with global capitalism – the backdrop of skyscrapers – which through its consumerism and speed has no space for spirituality as such, while the spirituality, as a residual connotation or generative agency, might be at the very centre of it all.

If we look into matter (holy or rubbish) in relation to cosmic continuum and, for example, in the sense of neo-Spinozian thinking, all matter is equal, bound by the flow of raw cosmic energy. Braidotti states, “Spiritual practices are

embodied and embedded, active and affective. They do not take place in a fight from the flesh but through it” (Braidotti 2013, p. 320). This embodiment might have become a critical union between the spiritual and the secular, between matter and meaning, and as such it poses ethical questions.

In this inter-relational context, an understanding of the abject (as in Kristeva 1980) might have been challenged and transformed as the inherent psychoanalytical relationship between the Self and the Other, being turned into a mutual and inclusive relationship between differences (human and non/in-human). In this sense, it might transcend not only the psychoanalytical approach to processes of abjection, but also the whole of anthropocentrism by dissolving it, centralising the potentials of vital materialism in multiple flows of relations and intermingling with the productive and generative powers of the in-human. This might point towards disintegration of the abject; it might become imperceptible from the individualised psychoanalytical constructions and, as such, from the former anthropocentric subject.

After the filming, with my assistant Li Xinrui translating, I talked with the worker and explained the critical content and purpose of my video, asking for his permission to use the footage in my work. While giving permission,<sup>53</sup> he stated that he had guessed as much.

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<sup>53</sup> This worker wished to remain anonymous.



Images 44 and 45. Stills from edited video channel 1

Duration 9.42.

A worker cleans the leftovers of incense and burns rubbish in the Sacred Vessel in a forgotten Buddhist temple by the Yangtze River.



## 2.5. Close to the ball

I started editing the coal ball rolling footage. I had shot lots of different footage, from narrative shots that captured the whole process, including the residents arriving and leaving the site, to long-view shots displaying the performer in the environment and close-ups showing only the hands of the performer rolling the balls.

Instead of the whole performance or performer, I focused on the hands and the intimacy of a body, the coal ball, close to the body of the performer and to the body of the film-maker. I decided to exclude the environment and even the identity of the performer by using frames which do not show her face. In film theory, the face in cinema “is usually associated with three roles; it is ‘individuating’ (it allows us to recognize or distinguish the person), ‘socializing’ (it manifests a social role), and ‘relational’ (it ensures communication between people)” Tarja Laine (2006, p. 7). What might the implication be if I used only her hands and parts of her Chinese army uniform as she meticulously and repetitively rolled one ball after another, every now and then adding polluted water to the polluted mixture of coal and soil?

Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of ‘faciality’ reflects on market economy in despotic power relations through the hyper-individualistic branding of iconic faces and overwhelming role they play in the construction of social imagination and collective cultural imagery. But why would one position the other, or the object, including the human body, solely to satisfy the subject’s (the viewer’s or author’s) inner psychological ambitions in search for their rational, in meaning? Why would one want to project the gaze of the Western subject upon the other and persist in producing this understanding? Wouldn’t this result in reducing the artwork in the Western context to exactly this subject position? These questions point out the very issue I challenge in this PhD project. My work in production deals with the accelerated globalisation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its effects and the shifts in the relationship between the human and its others. The context is subjectivity of ‘being with’ or co-being within this reality. Here, intersubjectivity is not necessarily limited to inter-human exchange and so might become operative in terms of a posthuman/postanthropocentric understanding of our world, in which the human is just another life form among all others.



Images 46 and 47. Stills from edited video 2  
Duration 5.35





I intended to embed vitality and materiality in the fragments, in order to suggest interconnections between subjects and objects: material and immanent connections between the human and non-human. Thus, instead of dualisms and othering, my aim was to create a connecting flow of relationships between the body and soul of the worker and those of the water, the coal ball and the film-maker – me. My intention, in framing the face out of the image, was to challenge hierarchies, the signifying regime and fixed identities, as well as ideas of the objectification of the individual. Thus, rather than objectifying and exploiting these fragments in a voyeuristic gaze at isolated images of the other, the facelessness, together with the leaving out of language, is intended to interconnect the different individual bodies in them: that of the coal, that of the water and that of the worker. In this way, the effect of the image might be more powerful for the viewer: the facelessness as an interface might challenge the viewer to a more physical connection with the image. The gesture in itself is common and used by us all wherever we are, whereas the image of performer and her surroundings would locate the action solely to China, as well as 'the other' as poor and a figure of abjection for the viewer, interconnecting the body of the viewer to the bodies in the video fragments. Might it become a critical response to economics or cultural identity? My intention was that the fragments would produce shifts between the artwork, the author, the viewer and the context(s), that they would reach us all, not by reducing the Other to Sameness, but by implicating ethically, materially and physically the viewer and the author in the image. What possibilities for transformative intersubjective relations and shifts between the human and its other can be developed in my artwork using this conceptual approach? It was my intention to explore whether, in this way, exclusion would propagate inclusion, and to question what it would mean to do this?

## 2.6. The rolling coal ball – connecting contexts

Continuing from these two videos of the rolling of the coal ball and the burning of the rubbish, I aimed to construct alternative narratives, other possible futures, from the other footage I had shot in the village near Beijing. I started experimenting with metaphorical, allegorical and associative narratives. My key aim was to find out how to work with this material in such a way that the specific fragments would not assign meaning only to the geolocation and its isolated contexts. I started deliberately to shift the documentary material away from its traditional aim (to lead the viewer in a particular hierarchical relation in which the subject would be 'explored', or rather 'exposed'). My aim was to challenge this by using close-ups of ritualistic actions (such as the hands of the resident rolling the coal balls) and interconnect them with close-ups of the environment (such as plastic waste moving and breathing in the wind and of polluted soil) that are addressing different modes of performativity, human and non/in-human. The long shots intend to interconnect them with the environment. I started building allegorical connections and transitions, such as those depicted in the following images:



Image 48. Video still from the coal ball rolling performance  
Shots showing more of the environment, and the worker in relation to the larger context.



Image 49. The neighbour's dog  
It appears in the rolling performance but also in another fragment, playing with other dogs on a pile of coal.



Images 50-52. Pouring of water by the worker into the mixture of coal, soil and water. It co-exists with close-up shots of water and a coal brick in a pool of water, as well as in a close-up of water.





Images 53-55. Burning of incense and rubbish in the Holy Furnace  
This co-exists with shots of smoking factory pipes and polluted soil.







Images 56-57. Potential relations for transformative processes





Images 58-60. The ritual of purification

It returns in different fragments: in the burning of rubbish, in the cleaning of coal from the hands of the worker by rubbing them against each other, and in the resident sweeping the ground clean in front of her makeshift home next to the coal manufacturing plant.





Images 61-62. Video stills from edited videos

These are all mounted on one image for presentational purposes, in order to allow the reader to reconfigure potential becomings





Fragments, fixed-frame shots, reflect on and interconnect different contexts in the living society, as well as with the 'dead' and living materiality. I contemplated the images for a long time, considering in which order and for what duration they should appear, and how to control or construct the different narratives or interconnections. In this time-consuming process, I was watching and listening, and interconnecting individual videos to one another. At first, I was manipulating the duration of the fragments and tried to build synchronic events. But this composing and orchestration of the material seemed somehow too rigid; disallowing or silencing the voices of the subjectivities (human and non-human). Wasn't my aim to allow them their own authority and generative knowledge-powers? I decided that each video should be of a different duration: this non-synchronicity, of both the images and the soundscape, might allow the videos to continuously to build new narratives, possible futures and new systems of dependency. Would this be evident in the viewing process? Might it open up continuous spaces for becomings? Together, the videos should build and rebuild their own life cycles, lifeworlds and cosmic interconnections, and thus becomings (due to the different durations). Through experimentation, I decided that I would need four channels to allow these reconfigured contexts to be effective. The number four also relates to the four cardinal directions – East, West, South and North – reflecting how they move between and beyond their contexts of origin, traversing cultural geographies. Might they become transformative entities which do not only point towards themselves but also allow for the emergence of their different extended affects, direct and indirect, allegorical and concrete? I saw these various fragments, constructs and contexts as differences in negotiation with each other, human and non-human subjects as if in conversation, generating possible and contingent futures. Through these thoughts, I formed the title 'Rituals to Mutations'.

The final editing for it was done in Amsterdam in the summer of 2013, together with the film editor Tina Bastajian.

The final form of the work is a four-channel HD video installation, durations 8.11, 5.35, 13.04, 10.41.

Once the videos were finished, I started experimenting with the way the four-channel installation should be presented – in a mediated environment, in cinematic space. My initial idea, during the editing, was to show the work as projections, on different sides of the exhibition space. That way, the spectator would have to react physically to the different sounds by turning towards one coming from an opposite direction, in order to connect it with the image. However, in practice, this turned out to diminish the impact on the viewer: the power of the images reflecting on each other, their affect, seemed to get lost when not seen simultaneously. The same problem occurred when I

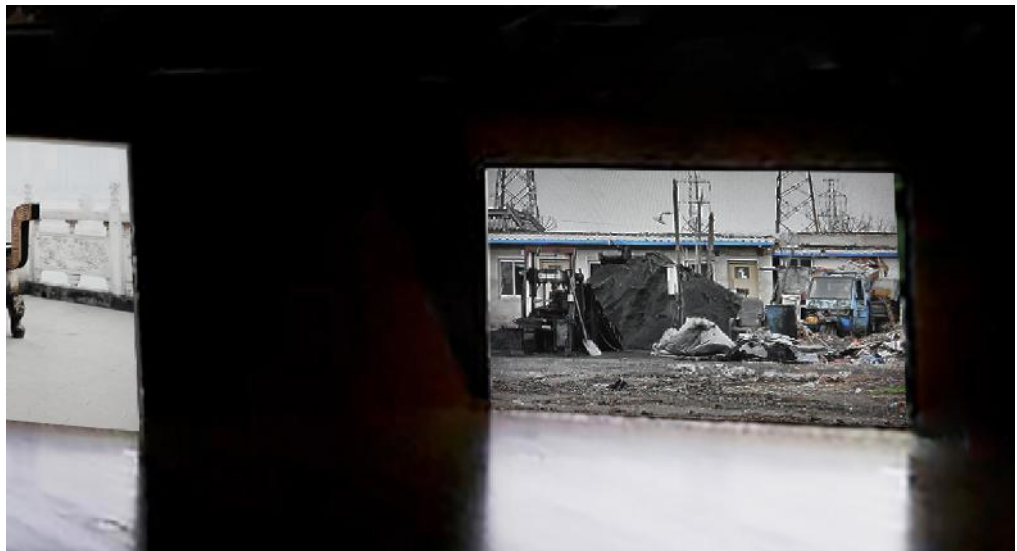
experimented with monitors, which were arranged in a circle, and when I tried placing the monitors facing the centre of the circle, which fixed the viewer in static viewpoint in the middle. Such a position, setting a stage for the viewer to stand in the middle of the installation, might be experienced as literally anthropocentric. Furthermore, it might disallow flows and movements, the becomings and intersubjectivity that I aimed to generate through the inter-relationship of the videos. Therefore, I decided to explore whether moving/shifting the positioning of the viewer might cause a similar shift in their relation to the proposition of the work, thereby unfixing static, i.e. anthropocentric thinking.

Thus, I decided that all the videos should be facing the viewer from the same direction: the distance of the monitors or projections and the way the loudspeakers would be placed, would grant each video sufficient autonomy. The sounds, that form the soundscape, are projected from a position where they appear to emerge, echoing yet transforming the horizontal, simultaneous movement of the non-chronological, non-linear video fragments between the four screens. My aim was to create a cinematic experience through which the viewer would not be able to differentiate images or sounds and would allow an overlapping inter-relationship at one ongoing moment of encounter. Still, at the same time, the viewer would be able to contemplate and build singular and generative narratives across the interconnections they might produce. The following pages feature images documenting these reconfigurations.

The viewer would face the videos and the soundscape, absorbing and reflecting on them all simultaneously. What would the affect be, how might the process of abjection (e.g. in the act of coal ball rolling) with regard to the other fragments become a catalyst, a generative rupture or an allegory in relation to and for exploring larger cultural, social or global phenomena? I intended that the simultaneous presentation of the video fragments might allow the viewer to build constructs and interrelations which would enable the meaning to propagate beyond the sites and places of origin, across cultural geographies and into other realms. How might aesthetic production enable uniting terms and/or/conditions, which might be seen as oppositional to each other, e.g. material and immaterial, capital and social, secular and spiritual? And how could these unions produce new knowledge and conditions for mutuality in artworks?



Images 63 and 64. Details installation *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) as a projection in a studio in Beijing 2013



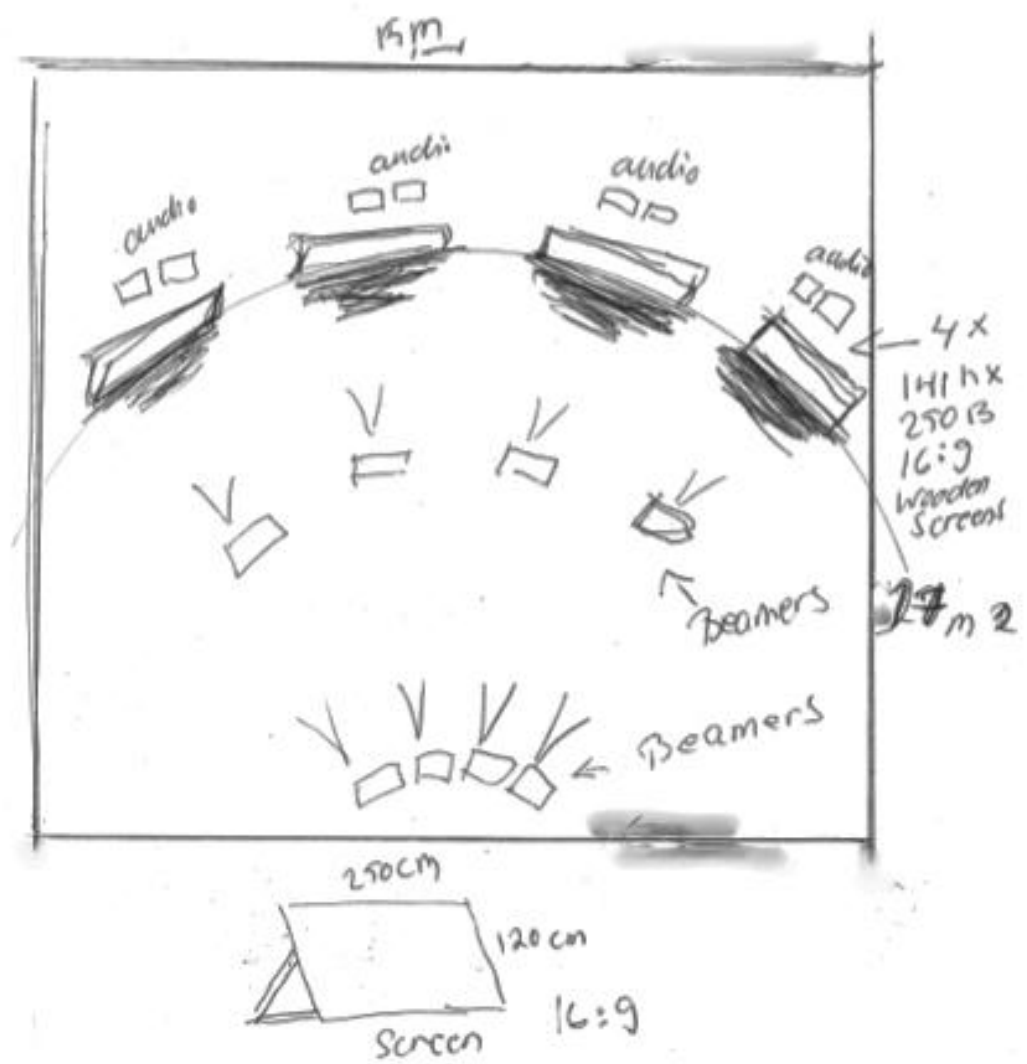


Image 65. Sketch of installation in the studio, Beijing 2013

## 2.7. From virtual to material

At this stage, I was still living with a number of coal balls. They occupied a prominent place in my studio in Beijing. I felt that I was not 'done' with this project – not yet. I needed to react and work with the actual material, to use the coal as a medium and work further with the mutated shape of a ball as a basis for pushing this research further. But then, how would this reflect the physical process of labour involved in their making? If we look into terms of physical labour, it could be seen as the labourers selling their own body, their energy, in the production. Reflecting capitalism within a nature-culture continuum, Braidotti states that "advanced capitalism reduces bodies to carriers of vital information, which get invested with financial value and capitalized" (Braidotti 2013, p. 117). Thus, it levels out other categorical differences and makes neo-liberal politics even rawer and cruder. Rather than reducing differences to information and capital value, and reflecting this inhuman potential of self-organisation, I aimed to explore this relationship more affectively and physically. I was contemplating developing work with the actual coal balls, not by means of a documented performance as I already reflected on this in *Rituals to Mutations* (2013). I was contemplating staging the act of labour in the exhibition space as such, as for example, in the highly critical work of artist Santiago Sierra, *133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blonde* (2001). In Sierra's piece, the participants, illegal street vendors in Venice who came mainly from Africa and Asia, are altering themselves or, more specifically, being altered for payment, in order to appear more privileged. However, rather than building on the critical context of difference by exclusion and in terms of identity politics, I was more interested in addressing difference and inclusion via questions of materiality and its potential.

As the site of my project is in itself marginalised, could it be possible to de-centre the hierarchical relationship of inequality and the direction of the movement of this process from the centres to the margins? Might it be possible to generate critical context via the material and the respective energy it produces, which would also reference both the labour (and the labourer) and the menial and un-institutionalised act of coal ball rolling? I aimed to reflect on the inequalities between the consumer and labour via the raw material in itself and its potential to reference different realms at once e.g. global economics and politics, environmental pollution and global warming, and different material qualities as well as transitional processes. I aimed to examine the potential for transforming the oppositional and hierarchical relation this context might generate.

My aim was to examine the possibilities of generating resistance, as well as mutuality, in terms of material and ethical inclusion, by situating the utilitarian use of energy in direct relation to the cosmic flow.



Image 66. Santiago Sierra, *133 personas remuneradas para ser teñidas de rubio*

"133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blonde", 2001. Installation view, Venice Biennale. Image courtesy of Studio Santiago Sierra.

I started simply by making new balls by myself and arranging and rearranging both these and the old ones made by the workers in different geometrical compositions, as well as randomly. The balls kept leaving coal dust and small crumbs on the surfaces they were placed on. It was, among other things, this active dynamic or continuous expression of transformations that made me think about games, as in actual games involving a ball, but also in reference to capitalist systems and the whole coal industry. I intended to reflect on the way we humans exhaust our planet, our natural resources and each other in pursuit of material gain, and the inherent processes of marginalisation. In this research project, this is relevant in order to reflect hierarchy in materiality, and to challenge exclusivity and hierarchy by proposing possibilities for the inclusion of the viewer as well as the author. The dynamics of the randomly positioned balls made me think about billiards and the possibility adding another object, and therefore a dynamic to the installation in progress.

The addition of the cue would suggest an inhuman generative relationship, 'intra-action' between subject and object, between the 'player' and object, that is being 'played' or vice versa. Together with the coal balls, the raw material, coal, which, due to its economic potential, sets the playing field – the ethical relation- they might trigger and generate associations with myriad capitalist systems and hierarchies governing the politics of the coal industry, and how that fossil is spread by the human, as pollution. Might this transform these hierarchical and ethical relationships between the self and the other to mutual ones? The coal ball itself, while embedded in the social reality of China, could be understood as an allegory of the marginalised individual in any geolocation as part of the global capitalist system being both a victim of these practices and a participant through consumption. In order to stress this shifting relationship, I decided to cover the cues with coal dust, aiming for a more fluid connection, a flow, in the suggested relationship between the 'played', the coal ball, and the imaginary 'player', the would-be viewer who is confronted with the cue. I was also interested in the potential for transformation of the material, the coal dust; in how this would bring out its ubiquitous nature, for instance, how it covers the surfaces of the villages in the winter as a pollutant spreading through the atmosphere and how it penetrates our body from the outside while simultaneously being a basic element, an internal part of it. The direct presence of this potentially toxic and 'dirty' material, coal, both as balls and cues, would include the viewer (e.g. materially and ethically) and allow more physical experience or identification – as potential participant in the game.



## 2.8. Productions

The initial production of the installation took place in my studio in Amsterdam. I had brought a small number of the balls (about 100) with me from Beijing. I ordered seven billiard cues online to start and began to experiment with different methods of covering them with coal dust. In order to do this, I pulverised some coal balls, sanded off the varnish from the cues, applied regular water-soluble glue, thinly, to them and rolled them around in the coal dust. When the glue had dried, I repeated this process about three times until the cues were completely covered. Then I sprayed good-quality fixative on them. After this treatment, they appeared to be rather solid, yet, to my delight, were still shedding some coal dust. They would 'mark' the exhibition spaces. This subtle, non-human expression, together with residue of the coal balls (I anticipated) would remind the viewer of the potentiality of the coal to penetrate our lives, regardless whether we humans are living in a place where it is actively and openly used for our daily warmth and food. As we all know, coal is used as an energy source for the production of myriad articles and substances manufactured or refined for global sale and economy. I'll unpick this relationship here for more clarity: As part of this capitalist process, we all as humans become co-enablers of the coal industry as one of the major atmospheric pollutants, regardless where we are. Hence, we all are implied victims and co-products, but also producers, through consumption, of these global processes. It was my intention that the installation would express this inclusivity ethically and materially by exploring how these entanglements suggested by and embedded in the objects and materialities of the installation in relation to the imaginary role by which viewer might transform the binary relationship between the self and the other. This would be achieved not only by challenging the identity politics of nation-states via global capitalism, but also by reflecting how this might transform the relationship between subjects and objects.

In the spring of 2014, a larger scale production took place in Beijing. I needed to make a bigger installation for a show (Star Gallery, the exhibition *Uneasy Trip in Asia* 28.6- 15.8.2014). For this installation, I produced about 500 balls with the assistance of a worker in my friend Li Min's studio compound,<sup>54</sup> Zhao Shifu, in Ma Quan Ying (another village further to the north of Beijing). My studio was not suitable for this large and dirty production. In Li Min's studio, I could produce the balls outside, in the shelter of the terrace roof attached to his studio. Coincidentally, Li also owns a bar with a pool table. As his 'free to use' cues were in poor condition, we made a deal: he would give me all of the cues (17 and a half pieces) that were in bad shape

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<sup>54</sup> A worker in a compound is a profession (unskilled) in China. The title 'shifu' is used here in an honorary sense reflecting on Mr Zhao's kind and humble personality.

and I would buy him a few good-quality ones. Based on this rather random trade, the number of cues in the show would be 17.5. I ordered pulverised coal and earth from the coal manufacturing plant next to my studio in Caochangdi. I also ordered six rice bags, which would weigh about 300 kg in total. The worker at the plant would deliver the coal and sand to Ma Quan Ying the next morning. To my horror, despite there being several working cars in the yard of the coal manufacturing plant, one of which I assumed would be used for the transportation, in order to save the fuel money the worker chose to deliver the rice bags by a transport bicycle! The distance between these two locations is approximately 20 km, and this in the chaos and huge traffic jams of Beijing, in the summer heat and pollution! Unfortunately, many Chinese workers place thrift above their own health and comfort. I was astonished as this action was completely unanticipated, since I had specifically mentioned that I would pay separately for the transportation. This action made me think about the coal balls and their being burnt in the makeshift furnaces despite multiple pollutants, not only the toxicity of raw coal itself but also the impurity of the soil burnt with it, which is itself deadly toxic. This represented another example of how economic systems govern individual health.<sup>55</sup> These are indications of poverty but they are not more apparent to Westerners than to the educated local or non-Chinese, which is in itself another indication of poverty.

Zhao Shifu and I set up a small 'factory', a production space with all the materials: the coal mixed with earth, a bucket of water, a sanding machine to remove the rest of the varnish from the cues, glue and fixative. I also had hand-rolled some coal balls, as an example, in order to make communication easier.<sup>56</sup>

While Zhao Shifu was rolling the balls, I was working on the cues.<sup>57</sup> When we were finished a couple of days later, we had some 500 coal balls, neatly arranged on a plastic sheet, and 17 and a half billiard cues, covered with coal dust, leaning against the wall.

My neighbour, Mr Wang, peered through his window, gazing at the balls and cues, and lifted both of his arms in question. This way, he became the first viewer of the installation; after examining it closely, he burst into a deep laugh and told me (via a translator) looking at the coal balls tenderly, about how he

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<sup>55</sup> Here I need to mention that the makeshift furnaces, which are not connected to the central system of the district, village or even a compound, are illegal. Regardless, they do exist. At the moment, the government is planning to ban coal as a household warming fuel altogether during 2016 because of its severe environmental effects, at least in Beijing municipality. (Remark later in 2016: did not happen – still using coal)

<sup>56</sup> Zhao Shifu does not speak English, so the 'business deal', the negotiation about the salary and the timing of the work, as well as the communication during the production, took place in my poor Mandarin. As such, visual material is a necessary aid.

<sup>57</sup> While working, I did use plastic gloves and a mask and provided him with the same. I urged him to take the same H&S precautions, but he laconically pointed to the air (it was a particularly nasty day with high pollution rating). Because of that, he did not see the point. I did ask him again to use them but he chose to ignore me.

had rolled hundreds of them as a child in his village. His memory was in the first instance connected to the warmth and nourishment they enabled and the cosy family dinners in his hometown. He reflected on the fact that coal (or carbon) is the basic element of the human body, this way directly interconnecting his own body to that of the coal, shifting through the subject-object relations (I refer here to process of 'self-molecularisation' in relation to biology; how human and coal bodies share the same element, carbon). In traditional Chinese thought, and in vital materialism, it is the flow of raw cosmic energy that allows for bound identities, such as interconnecting one's body with that of coal. Interestingly the coal/carbon as part of the human body could also be understood as positioning us humans, not only as part of the cosmic continuum, but as contaminated waste (a dead body), and as such toxic in ourselves. Thus, in this sense, we might be seen as not only generating pollution, but as being abject pollution ourselves.

For him, the round shape and the act of rolling represented the universe, the cycles of lives and the cosmic continuum. In further conversation, he also elaborated on the installation by referencing socio-political, economic and ecological criticism, local and global. This speculative and grounded conversation was particularly interesting as it appeared as non-hierarchical navigation across realms- for example, from the material to the personal to the spiritual to the social and to the political.

As the installation references a game, I started to think about the expression 'blackballing', which refers to acts of social, professional, commercial or political exclusion, as in ostracism, boycott, negative vote or ballot. I decided to use this expression as the title of the installation,

*Blackballing* (2013) consists of the hand-rolled coal balls made of pulverised leftovers of a coal pile, merged with polluted soil, polluted water and billiard cues of different lengths covered with coal dust. Dimensions would be variable; thus, the number of balls and cues is adaptable according to the exhibition space.

## 2.9. Installations – *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013)

While these installations have previously been shown in different contexts and locations (e.g. China and the Netherlands) I will discuss them in detail here via *Coalworks*, a show in Gallery Huuto in Helsinki, Finland (December 2015 to January 2016), which consisted of both installations – *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) – presented on a large scale in the same space.

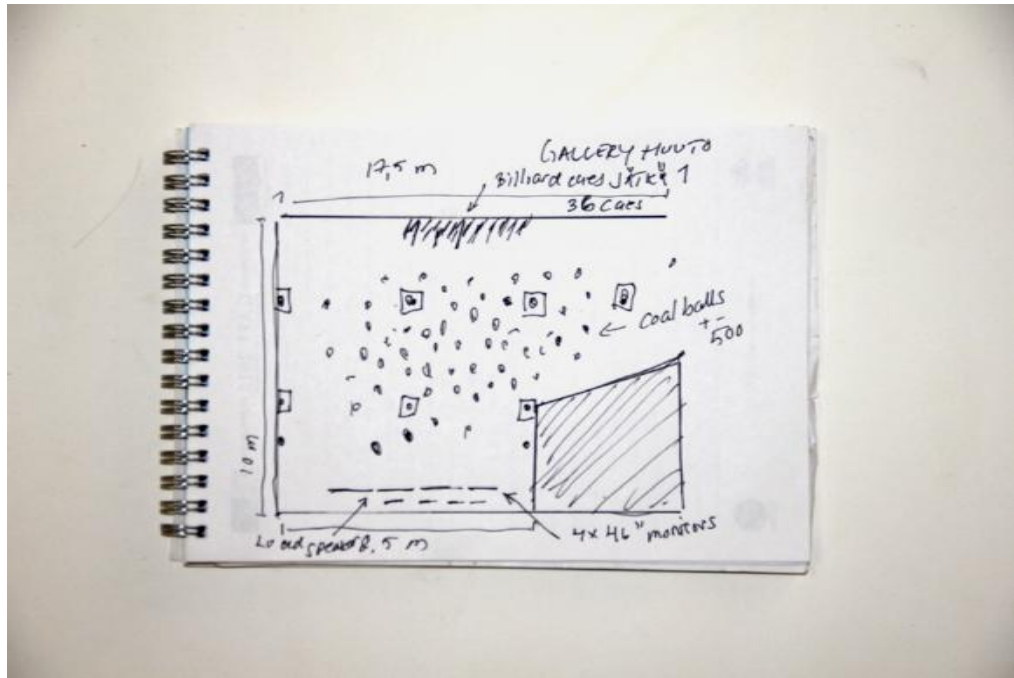
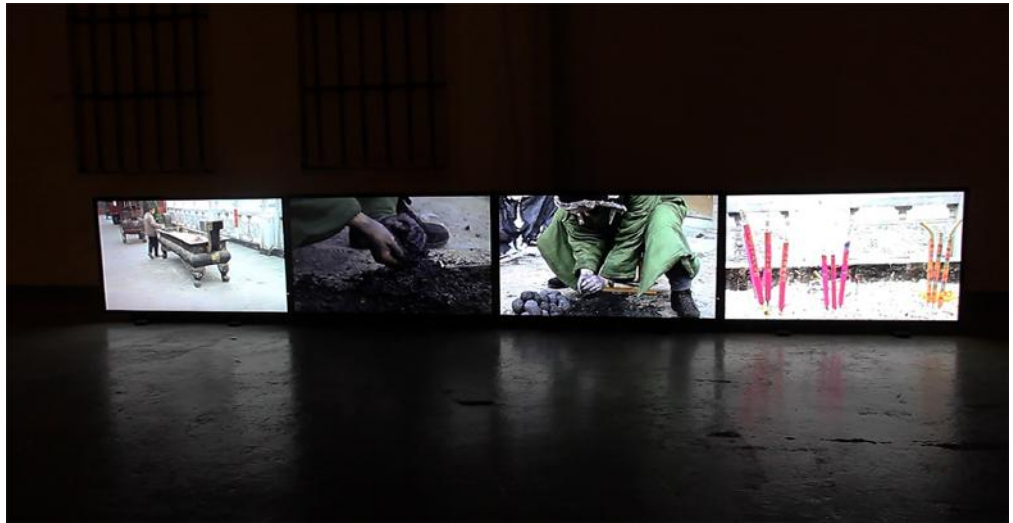
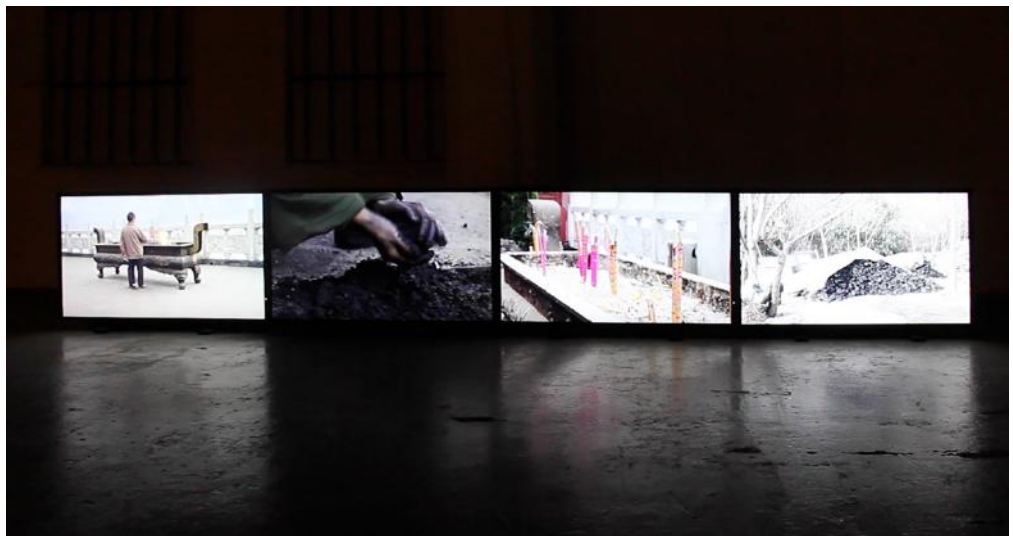


Image 67. Sketch to visualise the installations *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013)

Exhibited in one space (solo exhibition 'Coalworks', Gallery Huuto, Helsinki). *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) on 46" Nec monitors, soundscape played (mono) via four Genelec loudspeakers. *Blackballing* (2013), consisting of 500 coal balls and 36 cues.



Images 68 and 69. *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) on 46" Nec monitors  
Soundscape played via four Genelec loudspeakers (Gallery Huuto, Helsinki 2015-16).





Images 70-72. Overviews of the exhibition *Coalworks: Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013)

Gallery Huuto, Helsinki 2015-16

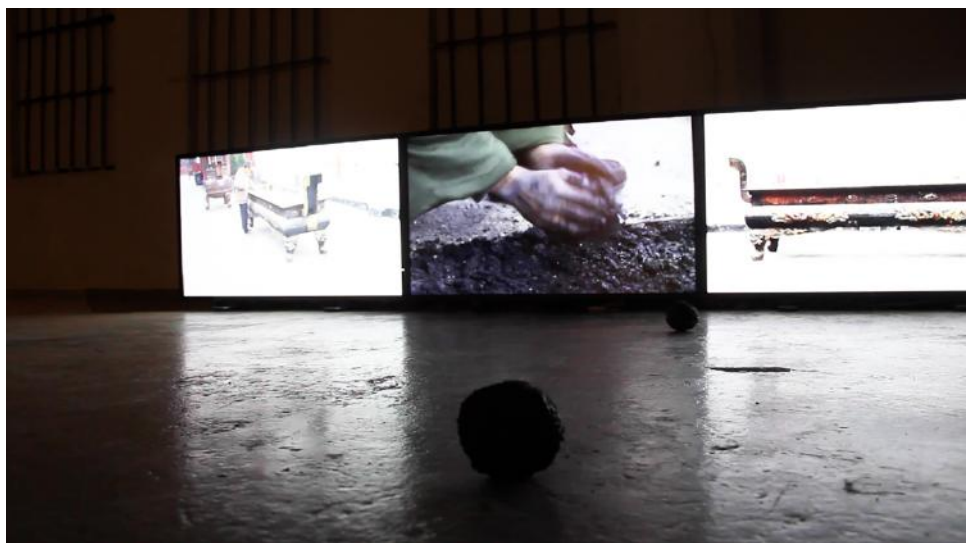






Image 73. *Blackballing* (2013)  
Overview, Gallery Huuto



Image 74. *Blackballing* (2013), close-up of coal balls



Image 75. *Blackballing* (2013), close-up of cues



When entering the space, the viewer sees two installations, *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013). The space is dark on the side where the four 46" *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) monitors and four loudspeakers behind them are arranged in a row on the floor. On the opposite side of the space, illuminated by dim spotlights from the ceiling, is *Blackballing* (2013). The coal balls are arranged randomly in the middle between the columns, but some are scattered further on in the space, away from the group of balls, indicating movement. The billiard cues of different lengths (35 pieces) are leaning against the wall, diagonally, on the side opposite the monitors. The environmental acoustics, the soundscape, fill the space. The viewer would be able to locate the origin of the sound in the direction of the monitors but not to connect it with a singular monitor. This separation of the image-functioning soundscape, a sonic aesthetic, escaping its host body (the image) would alter the viewer's experience and hopefully generate a new dimensional space which might be experienced as eternal space – an otherworldly and vital dimension.

Navigating around and between the fragile coal balls arranged in the exhibition space, the spectator would need to be careful not to crush them. Yet, stepping on and crushing them, either as an accidental or deliberate action, would be exposing and reflecting on the vulnerability, not only of the coal ball as the object – the assembled materiality – but of the whole set of systems, power structures and associations the installation addresses.

By placing the monitors on the floor, literally on the same level as the coal balls, I aimed to generate continuous space between the image-sound work (*Rituals to Mutations* 2013) and the objects of *Blackballing* (2013). Thus, the image of the rolling of the coal balls would be seen in a more direct relation to the actual balls. The soundscape would also, in this way, extend and connect to the other installation (*Blackballing* (2013)). Further, placing the monitors in this way would suggest that the viewer should sit down, close to the coal balls on the floor, which might be 'dirty' with coal particles and dust shed from the balls or carried around by the other viewers' shoes, in order to watch the video installation on a diagonal field of view. Sitting down, literally on the same level as the installations – and the content and contexts they propose – might indicate a shift in hierarchy between the viewer in a global location and the conditions of the sites, implicating the viewer ethically as well as physically. The installation might become immersive. For the viewer, sitting on the potentially coaldust covered floor would enable more physical connection with the material, coal, which might be experienced as abject; one would place their body close to the coal balls and, in so doing, might literally become dirty.

The coal-covered billiard cues are leaning against the wall as if they were in a regular billiard hall, transforming the meaning of the installation from coal ball

rolling to a globally played game. Taking global capitalism as an allegory *Blackballing* (2013), might suggest an imaginary game, which may be ongoing or may have already taken place, and provoke multiple associations from transformation of the materiality to fields of relations, such as marginality, global, environmental and capitalist politics, materiality and energy, and the utilitarian and the cosmic.

## 2.10. Reflection and dialogues

In this section, continuing the model introduced in Section 1, I analyse the installations *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) in relation to works by another artist, Ni Haifeng, and to current theorising of global art practice. I use reflections from random viewers in exhibitions and presentations in various contexts, as well as returning to some of the dialogues introduced in Section 1: those with artist and curator Alessandro Rolandi, and theorist and curator Mika Hannula. Further, I reflect on a conversation with Chinese artist and curator Huang Xiaoping that took place during a talk in Huangbian Zhang Research Centre at the Times Museum in Guangzhou. I remind the reader here that, as explained in Section 1, these dialogues reflect on the works based on viewing without utilising methodological questions, in order to explore how meaning, intensity and cohesion might shift in different locations.

Let us look, for example, at the large-scale Chinese installation *Para-Productions* (2008) by Ni Haifeng (Manifesta 9, 2012), which consists of a gigantic tapestry sewn together from discarded shreds, leftovers from the clothing industry, in a huge pile on the floor alongside sewing machines. These shreds were sewn together by an army of volunteers consisting of gallery employees, the artist's friends, local students and other members of the community. As part of the installation, there is a row of old-fashioned sewing machines, just like the ones one can find in any minor Chinese workshop, which the viewer can use and, in this way, actively participate in the production of the work. *Para-Productions* (2008) reflects on globalisation and the socio-political conditions of manufacturing, which are "in proper Marxist perspective, pivotal in the chain of social production" (Ni Haifeng 2009). It proposes that China has become the world factory and that the Chinese people have become the world's working class. In *Para-Productions* (2008), the hidden form of production, that which is in the factories, and that which is visible to the public eye unite.



Image 76. *Para-Production* (2008-2012), work in progress, textile shreds, tapestry, sewing machines, installation view 2012, at Manifesta 9, Genk, Belgium.

Image courtesy of the artist.

While the critical engagement with modes of participation in Ni's work is operative in direct form, as the audiences are allowed to use the sewing machines, *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) implicate the viewer in similar movements: not of goods in their 'manufactured' form, but via the raw material, the coal and its ubiquitous nature. Although Ni's shreds reflect on the futility of consumerism, and my coal balls on the survival of the marginalised, they both, through their materiality, address the failures of the dominant global economic system. Through different levels of collaboration, all of these installations could be seen as interrogating possibilities for social dimensions of authorship and the modes of experiencing art as active participation by implicating the viewer. Of course, in Ni's installation, the viewer is literally able to participate in the making of the installation by sewing together the shreds, and producing futility, whereas in *Blackballing* (2013), the participation is more on a conceptual or accidental level. Yet, in both installations, the marginality and the abjection of these materials become transformative entities, bodies that, through assembling with other bodies, function as inclusive ethical agencies or as political consciousness and might transform the relationship between the self and the other.

Reflecting on the viewer's comments, I hoped that much like the worker Zhao Shifu in Ma Quang Ying village while I was making the balls, audiences in all the presentation contexts would hopefully be able to reflect on the allegorical shape and substance of the coal balls. In various exhibition locations the audience commented on the circular movement of rolling them, visible in the video installation (*Rituals to Mutations* 2013) and in the irregular shape of the balls themselves (*Blackballing* 2013), and how it reflects, for example, planetary movements like the Earth turning on its axis. They commented on how this movement enabled the inclusion of other life cycles, being organic or industrial, human or non/in-human, which the works presented or generated.

However, such viewer experiences were not always without an initial struggle. In the exhibition *Coalworks* in Gallery Huuto (Helsinki December 2015-January 2016), a viewer, after sitting on the floor between the coal balls and watching the videos for a while, claimed to have become short of breath as a result of being so close to the coal and watching the imagery of pollution presented in the videos. This reaction could be situated in relation to the dynamics of pollution and virulence, how pollutants penetrate our bodies transforming the relationship between the self and the other, and in relation to how this relates to processes of abjection described in Section 1. The act of 'inhaling' the other also refers back to Teresa Margolles's installation *Aire* (2003), discussed in Section 1, the difference being that in my installations, the other inhaled was not human but non-human. In *Blackballing* (2013), toxicity and death, positioned in relation to deeper socio-economic

inequalities, were reflected by the capitalisation of fossil fuel – coal. The act of inhalation of the non-human other not only reminded the viewer of their own mortality and how we humans, including the viewer, are capable of killing each other (by criminal acts of murder), but how, with our eyes wide open, we willingly and lawfully murder ourselves, each other, alongside all other species, the environment and, finally, our whole planet.

In Beijing, in a presentation at the Institute for Provocation (*'Subjectivity and Local Knowledge'* Beijing, 6.11.2013), one participant's mother, an older lady from rural China, became deeply emotional, shaking her fist at the fragment of burning rubbish in the Holy Furnace (*Rituals to Mutations* 2013). After the lecture, she approached me (via a translator) and asked if I had directed the worker to burn the rubbish (apparently she had missed this part in the talk), worried that this would hurt the worker's soul. I explained that the whole video – the temple scene where the worker burns rubbish in the Holy Furnace – was the worker's own intervention. As a result of this, she calmed down somewhat and told me that she understood the underlying political implications and their importance as a statement.

Her understanding of the work was that burning rubbish in the Holy Furnace was sacrilegious action, as she was a devout Buddhist. Regardless, and accepting the imperfections of human life, she continued by commenting on how the videos together built stories related to her personal life and to her as part of the cosmic continuum, as she put it. Becoming-imperceptible marks the point of evacuation or evanescence of the bounded selves and their merger into the milieu, the middle grounds, the radical immanence of the Earth itself and its cosmic resonance. Becoming-imperceptible is the event for which there is no representation because it rests on the disappearance of the individuated self (Braidotti 2014, p. 137). With her simple but powerful comment, she might be understood as 'molecularising' and situating herself in the middle of this process, becoming an imperceptible, vital, inter-relational and integral part of the cosmic continuum. As Braidotti puts it, "'Life' does not respond to our names" (Braidotti 2014, p. 319). In this sense, the 'I' could be understood as a temporal and fleeting construction.

In a discussion following my presentation in Guangzhou Huangbian Zhang, Research Centre of the Times Museum (*Balls of Coal, Spirits, Sand and Dust: conversing the informal*, 13.12.2015), with artist Huang Xiaopeng (moderator) and a local audience, one participant asked whether my reaction to the burning of the rubbish in the Holy Furnace was that strong because I was an outsider, a Westerner, and therefore have a differing cultural experience. His point was that this act was simply a practical action that was probably performed daily. This comment led to a vibrant discussion as the rest of the audience also experienced this image as a powerful allegory and saw it in this context as a critical gesture. The audience reflected on the

status of spirituality in contemporary China and its relation to economics, noting how this action represented, for example, the corruption of and within religion. In contemporary China, it is not only the devoted and those in need, for example, the elderly and the sick, who seek spiritual guidance and redemption. The rich spend fortunes on religious practices and customised ceremonies, often performed by opportunistic quasi-practitioners, in order to cleanse their karma of the various and numerous acts of corruption, abuse and criminality through which they have gained their fortune. As such, these practices can be seen in relation to those of the Catholic church – the confession (however, in China these practices are far less institutionalised or authorised).

A strongly emotional response was evoked in a viewer of *Blackballing* (2013) in a presentation in Saari Manor, Finland, (*Artist Talk*, 15.10.2014), but this time the object of discontent was not spiritual but the existing socio-economic differences and globally operative systems governing and enabling the existence of such inequality, filth, health hazards and pollution. The installation was, therefore, directly experienced as a process, rather than as an object: as becoming, assemblage, interrelation of imagined political entities through which the relationship between the self and the other was transformed, from distance to nearness, to an experience of being directly ethically implicated. In my view, processes of resistance might not solely be operative as polarization, as pointed towards another. Rather, they might also function as a critical voice and, as such, as a demand for equality.

In this PhD project, this statement is important as it highlights the potential of *Blackballing* (2013) for inclusion of the self as well as the other. On the other hand, this resistance, which points towards ourselves (humans), might also situate us humans as species as the abject in the universe: the corrupt and the destructive element, the perpetual danger which should be ousted unless it can be integrated, to operate as a nature-affirming, non-manipulative and non-destructive element.

In our discussion Mika Hannula (2014) *Talking Through and Thinking* [Interview via Email. In possession of author] 5.10.-2.12.2014, comments on how the “exotic” object, the coal ball (in *Blackballing* (2013)) transforms through, for instance, the direct reference to the globally familiar overall concept of ball games, through the shape of the ball and through diverse mundane activities such as the rolling of meatballs. According to Hannula, however, this conjunction does not annihilate or neutralise the coal balls’ critical context of origin. But is it really necessary to be able to familiarise an object? Can’t cultural details, such as the coal ball, in themselves, address interdependency and connectedness? Does the viewer need to be able to connect to a kind of a counter-narrative, a parallel or opposite recognisable signifier in other global sites, or in the site that is local to the viewer, thereby

being able to own rather than to share? My aim was not to create a narrative in order to solely to confirm the construction of cartographies of the border regimes and their identity politics.

And where does such positioning leave the relationality of materials?

Obviously, as I already noted in the previous chapter, in relation to *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), the installations *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) challenge the viewers to (re)consider their position regarding materiality as a transformative process. It might be necessary to consider these as fluid construction of, for example, mind-body, man-nature and culture-nature relationships, which require an affirmative position towards monistic thinking or imagination. When showing these three installations in China, however, these constructions were directly built by audiences as an inter-relational and integral part of the universe. Further, there was minimal reference to location and site origin. Locality was only a starting point for diverse processes. It was not seen as an isolated and separate domain of identity and geopolitics, or to explain the Other, but directly connected to or seen on a cosmic scale.

As I stated in the previous section, in China the installations were at first sight experienced and approached via the spiritual, whereas in the West they were mainly experienced initially as political. After longer viewing, however, these initial responses were extended to include and merge with other fields of relations through which the individual might dissolve: the mediators, the middle grounds, the otherworldly might merge with the environments, the political and the social constructs in recognition of continuums and life, and the vital force that animates all (Braidotti 2014, p. 137).

In order to examine the operations of these processes, I wished to consider these localities and the possibility that the cultural details in these installations might provoke the viewer to think solely in terms of China, the 'site and situation' as such, without generating extended contexts and interconnections across cultural geographies. Starting from such a conclusion, Alessandro Rolandi (2015) *Outside the Law and on Tao Informal discussion with Author* [Transcript in possession of author] 25.1.2015, Iowa community, Beijing, reflected on *Rituals to Mutations* (2013):

The first reaction I have is that how the work seems to be reflecting on the other, as a European they (the installations) seem to be something that belongs to the third world economies, to developing countries. It takes a bit of time, to enter in to the videos, but after a while it (the work) starts opening up. The strongest image is the rolling of the balls, and how it builds other values. For me, in the beginning it is about China, about economics and socio-politics but after you have watched it more times you start thinking less about the context and more about connectivity.



Thus, there was a shift from the localised perception to a spatio-temporal one, a shift away from othering. The processes of marginalisation (third world economies) might have become inclusive and dependent, operative outside concepts of nation-states and their induced separations. Further, these shifts might allow or challenge the viewer not to distinguish that which, in the Western or modern conception, is inherent in the object from what belongs to the human subject. Therefore, these viewing processes might entail de-centring the human – the viewer – and processes of unlearning anthropocentric knowledge. In this case, the initial alienating experience of being confronted with the lifeworlds of the other turned into a process of reflecting interdependency, and thus of inclusion. That is to say that in *Rituals to Mutations* (2013), the concepts of otherness and individuality might be exposed as outdated strategies of alienation.

So where are we now? The materiality, the non-human subjectivities, express in the videos the mutable potentials of coal alongside the image of the worker framed in the action of the rolling the coal ball, moving on to the fragments reconfiguring inter-relations to each other; these might be seen as producing inclusion. I am proposing that in my installations, our subjectivities, abjections, animations, sites and locations, our being in the world, might become a process of being of and with the Earth, being of and with the Cosmos. Hence, this process cannot be analysed by the dualisms – nor by minoritising or universalising without difference – which have dominated Western philosophy and world views. Rather, the viewing process might necessitate or generate monist and postsecular perspectives which actively include differences, differences structured by affirmation and emancipation of the object and materiality as subjectivities and in recognition of the potentials of Life.

## 2.11. Findings

In Section 2, I am concerned with two projects, *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013), which developed from the same context, or rather an object, an encounter with a row of small hand-rolled balls of coal on a street in Caochangdi village. I continue reflecting through my political nomadic positions and shifting the relationship between margins and centres. To remind the reader, I repeat my research questions here.

- How are nomadic politics, extensive lived experience, local knowledge and different levels of collaboration incorporated in my artworks and how to communicate these processes to the viewer?
- How might my installations propose a more expansive account of abjection which allows for a new kind of agency beyond the limited notions of psychoanalytical and Eurocentric positioning of Subjects and Objects? I expand these questions through a consideration of Deleuze's notion of 'becoming', animism and nomadic modes of temporality and location within my artworks.
- What kinds of union between meaning and material might this generate? And how might they be propagated beyond their sites and places of origin, across cultural geographies and into other realms? What kind of ethical implications might all of this entail and generate?
- What possibilities for transformative, inclusive and intersubjective relations among humans and between them and their others can be developed in my artworks, using this conceptual approach?

The key aims I set for myself are:

- To consider the encounter between author, viewer, artwork, contexts and the (human) subject's relationship to the materiality of my artworks.
- To examine how the experience of the artwork has agency in transforming these aforementioned relations.

Through my installations, I am concerned to examine how images and processes of exclusion and objectification, such as the faceless image of the worker, might be turned into processes of inclusion through an interdependent relationship with other images and processes and to spatio-temporality. Through the use of and by intermingling material, human performativity and non-human performativity, in the artworks I aim to seek potential for inter-relationality beyond and between locations and across different realms, and to explore their affect in the actual physical encounter or viewing experience.

By disregarding the spoken human voice, by allowing the acoustics of the environments, the human and non-human subjectivities and agencies, to take over and produce an interdependently operating soundscape, I aimed to generate a more affective, immersive and open experience for the viewer. I intended the installations to reflect on how materials and thoughts can open up interdependent and collaborative relations between heterogeneous elements, such as materials, bodies, organisms, contexts and objects, operating as individual agencies. That particular objects and non-human lifeworlds might evoke speculations about their enabling conditions; that non-human entities, beings, bodies and substances and the in-human might have subjectivity, that they might be self-organising, knowledge-producing, expressive and vocal. That they might reflect how life is not solely shaped by and for human use or comprehension, that knowledge might not be produced solely by human subjectivity. As such, the installations might have generated intersubjectivity beyond inter-human relationships. Simultaneously, these intersubjective relationships might enable inter-relationality across different realms and geographical and cultural locations.

The extensive investment in time that I needed to develop these installations, and to merge with local life in order to do so, is also reflected in the viewers' experiences (in the extensive time needed for viewing). Instead of fast and superficial connections built within the installation via, for example, politics of recognition, I intended to provoke in the audiences a more active and productive negotiation which might allow them to reconsider their own position. This investment in economically non-productive time could also be seen as resistance to how it might be regarded by the current consumerist, neo-liberal world with its mechanisms of capital, spectacle and marketing, and capitalisation of the Earth. Through the installations, I hope to propose deconstructions of the concepts of abjection and resistance. I aim to turn these processes from pointing towards another to a process that includes us all, human and non-human. These relationships might have become mutual and inclusive.

Through these reconfigurations and modes of presentation, I hope that my artworks might enable shifts between the viewer, author, site and exhibition space. My aim was to create generative representation through and with multiple co-actors, which might challenge anthropocentric and individualistic views on the relationship between the self and the other. Whatever the vehicle for the initial participation via implication produced by the viewer, e.g. the otherworldly, imaginary, ethical, political, biological or social, the installations seemed to have enabled transformations of the oppositional relationship between the self and the other (human and non-human).

In my installations, that which initially might have been experienced as a process of abjection might have transformed and generated, simultaneously

or processually, a rise in new kinds of unions of differences (human and non/in-human). These unions of materiality, temporality and spatiality, through which meaning and material are entangled, performed or evoked by the installations as processes of becoming might emerge through representational use of vital and self-organising qualities embedded in non/in-human as allegories, in order to produce entanglements of material and meaning.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have given a processual account of my research and the production of the three installations (*One Hundred Ten Thousand* 2011-12, *Rituals to Mutations* 2013 and *Blackballing* 2013). Through my political position as a nomadic artist and extended lived experience as a resident of Caochangdi village in Beijing, through my method of working and being with (rather than, for example, speaking about), I aimed to develop intersubjective relations in my artworks that might have generated inclusive relations between subjects and objects, human and non/in-human.

I have explored these questions and subjectivities to embed local knowledge and references to current theorising on, for instance, new materialism, especially in relation to vital materialism and the post-human. Furthermore, this research led me to questions of the post-secular.

I have situated the Eurocentric psychoanalytical notion of abjection in extended fields of relations through which processes of abjection do not operate as a psychoanalytic shift between the human subject and other subjects/objects, but rather open up relationality through which 'I' and the individual human subject disappear. As such, the process of abjection might become imperceptible to other processes that are generated or exposed through the materiality and relationality proposed by the artworks. I argue that this process of transformation, embedded in the installations, is generated and embodied in temporality. It is through the duration of the encounter and experience (of the author as well as the viewer) that the installations allow the viewer to reconfigure the relationships between subjects and objects, and their spatio-temporality as inclusive.

I argue that *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) might generate the possibility of processual thinking for the viewer, which enables union between meaning and materiality beyond the context and site of origin. These reconfigurations are produced in the artworks by utilising the self-organising potentials of the non/in-human and the vital potential of the non-human, and engaging them and these qualities they embody as active and productive co-actors and co-subjectivities in the production of generative and allegorical futures and future-pasts. The installations are intended to create hybrid spaces of material and meaning that give rise to something new which can be understood as a negotiation between the processes of becoming and abjection at the same time. I argue that *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12), *Rituals to Mutations* (2013) and *Blackballing* (2013) propose possibilities for shifts between the artwork, the author, the viewer and the contexts: through these generated shifts, they might reach us all, not by reducing the

Other to Sameness, but by implicating the viewer in the installations, ethically and materially, as a difference among other differences.

I argue that the marginality and the abjection embodied in my installations might become transformative entities, bodies that through assembling with other bodies, might function as interconnected bodies, as ethical agencies or as political consciousness. Furthermore, I argue that these installations might generate a mode of resistance that operates as inclusive of the self as well as outside institutionalised domains.

These processes, actively performed by the installations, could be described as processes of sharing rather than owning: sharing of landscape, land, country and the universe, on a human, non/in-human, geological and planetary scale. They intend to generate embodied and embedded perspectives in which alterities might find their place, creating a collective body composed of expanding relations of dependency, and through this, conditions for more ethical, material and otherworldly relations (for example, spiritual and spectral). between the human and its others.

My research might contribute to a rethinking of how aesthetic production actively generates conditions for reconfiguration of transformative processes through artwork and to the thinking about the posthuman/postanthropocentric condition.

However, it has left me keen to research further the postsecular and its potential to reflect political subjectivity and criticality without oppositional consciousness and the possible worlds, networks, webs or rhizomes of interconnection with others that are embedded in and mobilised by ethical relations. In my opinion, new materialism and the posthuman subjectivity in artistic production tend to be approached through and in conjunction with science and technology, and through the virtual world. In this sense, post-secular spirituality embedded in vital materialism of the zoe, and reflected through and grounded in everyday life and localities, in actual and material relations, might be regarded as unspectacular and, therefore, be an untapped source for future research. I think there is urgency for more intimate, embodied and embedded connection with the Earth; once this has been acknowledged, from and through this grounded position to reflect possible further potentials of speculative forms and modes of expression and knowledge production.

This future research might lead to deeper exploration of these very embodiments and their representation, in order to critically to seek for affirmative and imaginary alternatives to the destructive powers of global capitalism and the exclusivity, and hence violence, of monotheism. In my opinion, it is through the acknowledgement of ontological relationality, monistic metaphysics and the nature-culture continuum that the shift towards affirmation of potentials of the postanthropocentrism takes place. This shift

may be humble, but in my opinion it is also the most essential and even the most confrontational and intimate. Further research into this shift might not necessarily incorporate Deleuzian joyfulness. Nor does it seek for a salvation of any kind but rather explores approaches that might be simultaneously critical and affirmative in investigation of potentials towards possibly more sustainable futures.

This future research will be embodied through my artistic production and in writing.

# GLOSSARY

**Abject-** Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theory of abjection is concerned with the subject's relation to the repulsive and the marginalised. The abject is neither a subject nor an object, but a threat to the subject's sense of identity, something experienced as loathsome which should be violently expelled. As such, abjection might not be so much the physically repulsive as the individual's relationship to that which disturbs identity, social and/or theological order. (Kristeva 1980, pp, 3-7).

P. 2, 5, 6, 10, 17, 30, 38, 39, 41, 92, 113, 114, 116

**Abject-** In this thesis, however, I propose a more inter-relational relationship between subjects and objects: processes of abjection that merge with becomings: Abjection as a multi co-actor becoming with.

(P. 1, 2, 6, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 26, 31, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 51, 58, 75, 77, 84, 85, 87, 90, 91, 92, 107, 113, 114, 116, 120, 129, 148, 152, 154, 156, 157

**Animism-** An anthropological construct used to define worldviews in which non-human entities possess spiritual essence.

**Animism** – In Anselm Franke's (2010) research animism is situated to revision modernity. Animism is not a matter of belief but a boundary-making practice.

P. 3, 6, 11, 41, 42

**Animism-** In this thesis animism as a belief system and boundary-making, or rather -dissolving, practices entangle.

P. 6, 11, 40, 42, 43, 51, 74, 91, 92, 152,

**Becoming-** Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a ahistorical path towards something new and unfamiliar. A generative way of being that consists of fluid confluences rather than resemblances Claire Colebrook, *The Deleuze Dictionary* (2013).

P. 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 26, 28, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 75, 85, 87, 89, 91, 102, 103, 108, 127, 128, 129, 149, 150, 154, 156

**Dualism-** Cartesian dualism is a philosophical theory or system of division of reality in two domains especially the matter and the mind.

**Dualism-** This thesis seeks to oppose dualisms by exploring local knowledge, monistic perspectives, continuums (such as for example culture-nature) and reflecting Rosi Braidotti (2011, 2013), Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2010, 2012) building on Deleuze and the Spinozan dictum that mind always being an idea of the body.

P. 4, 11, 17, 20, 27, 28, 30, 43, 51, 91, 95, 113, 120



**Intersubjectivity-** Psychological relation between people emphasizing shared cognition as essential for shaping interhuman relations.

**Intersubjectivity-** In this thesis I propose modes of intersubjectivity beyond human interrelations- including the non-human.

P. 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, 17, 18, 20, 26, 28, 29, 33, 38, 39, 44, 75, 92, 154, 108, 116, 118, 135, 149, 152, 154

**New Materialism-** Emerging thought in several fields of inquiry, including philosophy, cultural theory, feminism, science studies and the visual arts that offers an alternative perspective to materiality, signification, and to knowledge production as practice. It was develop in response to linguistic turn. The term is coined by Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti in the second half of the 1990s. As transversal cultural theory it does not privilege culture above nature, opposes dualisms and explores monist perspective of the human being. New Materialism enables “conceptualisation of the travelling of the fluxes of matter and mind, body and soul, nature and culture, and active theory formation” Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2010, 2012).

P. 3, 5, 10, 11, 43, 44, 58, 88, 156, 157

**Nomadic-** Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept for de-hierarchisation and deterritorialisation of power relationships, for example, in science, knowledge production or in socio-political context.

P. 7, 12, 28, 40

**Nomadic art** – Any art practice that traverses and opposes borders and hierarchies between territories or domains (real or virtual).

P. 7, 12, 28, 40

**Nomadic subjectivity-** Subjectivity in flux Rosi Braidotti (2011). In the context of economic and cultural globalization, for example, it reflects multiple forms of mobility that operate outside the concept of nation-states, identity politics and essentialist ideologies.

P. 7, 12, 28, 40

**Posthuman** – State of being beyond human. Posthuman discourse seeks to re-conceive the notion of the human and anthropocentric subject: the human is no longer superior to the non-human but one being among others Rosi Braidotti (2013).

P 1, 88, 118, 88, 113, 118, 152, 157, 166

**Resistance-** In this study, resistance is embedded and emerges in the context of global capitalism and its exclusive and hierarchical structures of

investment: abuse and political economy of commodification of all that lives and our environment.

**Resistance-** As agency, critical expression or statement performed or generated by the artwork.

**Resistance-** In this thesis I propose that resistance instead of pointing towards another turns against the self and as such operates inclusively.

P. 1, 13, 14, 18, 20, 27, 28, 31, 78, 80, 91, 92, 95, 96, 97, 103, 133, 150, 154, 157

**Temporality** – Having a relation to time, both in human and non- human perception. In this thesis, I am building on Deleuze (1989, 1990, 1994) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and referring to non-linear time, non-chronological and intertwining relation between past, present, and future and in relation, for example, to spatio-temporality, becomings, connectivity, repetition, difference and (cosmic) continuum.

P. 7, 16, 18, 22, 34, 51, 91, 94, 97, 102, 103, 110, 121, 128, 156, 157, 158

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Bots, Bodies, Beasts—The art of being Humble Anselm Franke: Mapping and Being Mapped. Navigation Systems, Control Environments and Cognitive Maps Gerrit Rietveld Academy/ Vlaams Cultural Center Brakke Grond 10.4.2016.

Politics of Display- Curating and its Public - Curators in China Speak About Their Practice, I Project Space/ Central Academy Museum Beijing 29.3.2016.

Posthuman Glossary II: Eco-Sophies, BAK Basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht 28-29.5. 2015

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## Virtual lectures (selection)

Karen Barad

Feminist Theory Workshop Keynote - Karen Barad.

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Graham Harman

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Bruno Latour with response by Anna Tsing

How to Sort out the Many Ambiguities of the Concept of Anthropocene

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## Other artists' works

Zachary Formwalt, *A Projective Geometry* (2012).

Teresa Margolles, *Aire* (2001).

Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson, *Bosbolobosboco 6* (2014).

Ni Haifen, *Para-Productions* (2008).

Santiago Sierra, *133 personas remuneradas para ser teñidas de rubio* [133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blonde] (2001).

Reference to Hito Steyerl's practice as a whole.

Reference to Trinh a Minh-Ha's *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (1983).

## Important exhibitions to this thesis (selection)

Taipei Biennial, The Great Acceleration 2014, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud.

10th Shanghai Biennale 2014: Social Factory, curated by Anselm Franke.

Fuck Off, parallel event to Shanghai Biennial 2000, curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi.

Time, Trade and Travel, 2013, SMBA, Amsterdam curated by Jelle Bouwhuis.

1st Asia Biennial/5th Guangzhou Triennial: Asia Time 2015. Chief curators Henk Slager and Zhang Qing.

The Vulnerable Citizen: Perspectives on Times of Transition, 2016, curated by Qi Zhu.

Reset Modernity! 2016 Zkm Karlsruhe, curators Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard-Terrin, Donato Ricci and Christophe Lelercq.

## Appendix

### Appendix A. Full audio piece *One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) in writing

'During his first visit to the village, he met a local man more than 70 years old who taught him a bit of the village's history.

The village is called Zhangwanfen and is part of the Jinzhan township in the north-eastern outskirts of Beijing. It is named after a villager with the surname Zhang. He was the most prominent resident of the village between the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican period.

The Zhangs were the wealthiest family; it's also said that they were the family of a third-ranking officer. Because they had money and influence, the family was nicknamed 'Zhang Baiwan' meaning 'Zhang one hundred ten thousand', in other words, 'Zhang one million'. The Zhang ancestral grave used to be next to the village, and the place later became known as the 'Zhang One Hundred and Ten Thousand Grave' village. During the Cultural Revolution, or maybe a little after, some people saw graves being dug up in the night, in an attempt to move the ancestral grave.

Those buried in the graveyard around the village are local people. There are both old and new graves. Before the 1960s, bodies were buried, but afterwards only the ashes. Nowadays, the bodies are mainly cremated in the Dongfeng one-storey crematorium in Chaoyang district.

Originally, whole family clans lived there; three or even four generations lived in the village at the same time. It was a vegetable-farming community, though there were also some that worked in the village committee, the village militia, village sanitation, and some young people worked in businesses. A minority worked in the city.

Later, because of heavy industry and pollution, the fields became unsuitable for farming. Most of the villagers were Beijing people, having lived there for generations. But there were also migrant workers who had moved in from the Shandong, Hebei and Shanxi provinces. There were over 600 people living there, in more than 100 households.

Zhangwanfen village was demolished in 2010 as part of the government's city unification programme. After the demolition, some villagers rented apartments at Jingwangjiayuan. These residential buildings for relocation will be completed at the end of 2012.

On his second visit, he met an elderly couple (the husband being nearly 80 years old) from neighbouring Beigao village. They had relatives that had married into Zhangwanfen village.

He also discovered a 'nail house' – a resident that refuses to relocate and whose house sticks out like a nail because everything else around it has been

razed. He was told that the nail house belongs to a family called Li. He heard a dog barking inside, so he peered in through the window only to find that the residents and furniture had moved out. A large, lame dog had been left behind – maybe because sometimes the relocation apartments are unfit for keeping dogs. The front door of the house had a hole for the dog to go in and out, but it seemed like he was waiting for his owners to return. It was then that he ran into a good-hearted labourer from the vicinity who had come by to feed the dog.

According to the lunar calendar, 1 October is called the Northern “Ghost Festival”. A folk saying goes, “The first of the tenth month, put on your winter clothes”. The living and the dead need to put on more clothes to prepare for the cold winter days ahead. The living visit their ancestral graves to pay their respects and to burn ghost money. It is thought that the dead can use the burnt money to buy new clothes for themselves.

When he was documenting the graves, an elderly man came to him on his bicycle.

The man raised his left arm over his chest and said to him that when taking a photograph of a grave, one should say a-mi-tuo-fo, meaning ‘may Buddha protect’ or ‘may Buddha preserve us’, three times to soothe the spirits around the graves and to show one’s respect to the dead. If one does not do this, it will bring bad luck, as the spirits grow angry and deliver nightmares and misfortune.

He twice visited Qianweigou village, which falls under the administration of the Sunhe Chaoyang district township of Beijing. He was told that it is named after a small river, or a ditch, which flows from the west to the east and in which reeds grow. In the east of the village, there used to be the Guandi temple, of unknown origin. It was repaired during the Republican period and torn down soon after the founding of the new China.

The village dates from the Yuan Dynasty period, 500-600 years ago, though it didn’t take shape until the Qing dynasty. It was composed of three parts: Qianweigou (front reed ditch), Zhongweigou (middle reed ditch) and Houweigou (rear reed ditch). Zhongweigou and Houweigou were demolished in 2009. Currently, there are nearly 2,000 people living in the village in about 500 households. There are more families of four or five generations in Qianweigou than in the surrounding villages.

Only some of the people are Beijingers, as most of the villagers migrated from the Shandong, Hebei and Shaanxi provinces. People buried in the graveyard are those who lived in the village, locals as well as migrants. After the 80s or 90s, only ashes have been buried in the tombs; cremations are usually held in the Pingfang crematorium. The old people in the village enjoy the New Agricultural Insurance Pension of about 1,000 RMB per month. The middle-aged mainly do property-cleaning work. Some of the young people



work in the city or village committees, but most of them work in rural enterprises. Qianweigou is one of the many villages in the outskirts of Beijing that lives under the threat of demolition due urban development’.

One Hundred Ten Thousand (2011-12)

Duration as audio ca. 7 min each March 2012, Caochangdi village, China

Credits:

The Honourable Elderly Neighbour

Voice-over Chinese: Zhang Yueyue/ 张悦悦

English: the artist

Sound editing: James Beckett, Qian Hao/ 钱浩

Translations: Michael Eddy, Leise Hook, Gordon Laurin, Megumi Shimizu, Qu Yizhen/ 曲一箴

The audio piece is added to the USB attached to this thesis; it is in English and Mandarin.

## Appendix B. Press releases of selected exhibitions

Press Release: Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam presents the exhibition 'Time, Trade & Travel' 25. 8, 21.10.2012.

This exhibition is the result of a collaboration with the Nubuke Foundation in Accra, Ghana, to which the show will travel in November. Time, Trade & Travel is a collective venture exploring the histories shared by Ghana and the Netherlands, over various centuries, diverse economic systems and geopolitical divisions in the world. The show explicitly relates to aspects of globalisation and transnationalism reflected in the field of contemporary art.

Grouping the works under the sweeping exhibition title 'Time, Trade & Travel' is a curatorial decision that points to the collaboration's extended focus on the complexities of global exchange fostered by capitalism, and its effects on life and art. Time, Trade & Travel set the participating artists on a quest for the historical encounters between Europeans and Africans, in which trade and the concomitant cultural exchange receive particular attention. From their manifold and individual perspectives, the artists examined the ways in which the economic and cultural relations of the past are continuing to have an effect in the present. The exhibition functions as a platform for the presentation of these artistic inquiries into pre-colonial trade, colonial legacies and tracing the continuing imperialistic conditions that characterise contemporary processes of globalisation. As a starting point, the exhibition can in part draw on the age-old trading relations between what is present-day Ghana and the Netherlands, a relation that was officially affirmed through the cities of Amsterdam and Accra in a mutual 'agreement on cooperation' in 2004.

Press release exhibition at Para Site Art Centre in Hong Kong 17.5-20.7.2013.  
'A Journal of the Plague Year. Fear, ghosts, rebels. SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong story'

Para Site proudly presents A Journal of the Plague Year. Fear, ghosts, rebels. SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong story. Starting from the events that affected Hong Kong in the spring of 2003, the exhibition traces the different narratives, historical backgrounds as well as the implications of these events in relation to the contemporary culture and politics of Hong Kong and the world.

The city has a subjectively internalised history of epidemics and of representations in the colonial era as an infected land that needed to be conquered from nature, disease and oriental habits in order to be made healthy, modern and profitable. These narratives culminated with the identification of the bacillus causing the plague during an epidemic in Hong Kong in 1894, in Para Site's current neighbourhood. This discovery contributed to a dubious association of the disease with Asia and heightened the "yellow peril" scares in Europe and America at the time. In Hong Kong, the fear of infecting agents has always resonated with a fear of other people, quarantine has mirrored exclusion, whilst epidemiological, racial and cultural contamination have shared the same language.

When the city became the epicentre of the most significant airborne epidemic in recent years – the SARS crisis of 2003 – the unparalleled shutdown of the city and the atomisation of society in quarantined segments led to an unexpected shift in the political awareness of the Hong Kong citizenry. Just after the end of the epidemic, record numbers of people turned out to protest against a new internal security law imposed by Beijing, causing its shelving and, more importantly, the emergence of an active political community. After that moment, the image of a de-politicised and soullessly pragmatic commercial hub could not anymore tell the whole story about Hong Kong.

Less gloriously, however, the main measure taken to alleviate the economic meltdown caused by SARS, the option for Mainland citizens to visit the territory for the first time on individual visas, caused another major shift in the identity of the city and its relationship to Mainland China. Medicalised vocabularies and imageries reminiscent of epidemics have been used in regard to the growing number of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong, seen as pathogens corrupting an otherwise healthy social body and as milk formula sucking locusts. Again, an epidemic becomes the backdrop to paranoia and hate, but the fear of the Chinese, of their vast numbers and uncivilised habits, is now harboured by fellow Chinese rather than by the self-content Europeans of the last plague visitation a century ago. This essentialising xenophobia has come to be a defining factor in the relationship between the two sides of the Shenzhen River, and paradoxically has complicated the pro-democracy (and

anti-Beijing) discourse and activism, rejuvenated in the wake of the SARS crisis.

These ambivalences in the identity of Hong Kongers are reflected in the figure of Leslie Cheung, the hugely iconic figure, actor and singer who committed suicide at the height of the SARS crisis by jumping off the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, in Central Hong Kong. His shocking death at the darkest hour of the darkest times in recent memory played its part in the mobilisation of Hong Kongers, who turned out in huge numbers for Leslie's funeral, ignoring the health warnings in effect at the time. Gor Gor's ('Big Brother' in Cantonese (as Leslie has been known) life and career have contributed to forging a strong sense of identity for Hong Kong culture, in spite of his queer and often contrarian persona. The versatility of the roles he played reflected (and arguably enhanced) the versatility of the city's identity over the past decades, before and after the handover. And his ghostly presence continues to do so. Cosmin Costinas and Inti Guerrero (2013).

## Appendix C: List of discussion referred to in the thesis

*Talking through and Thinking With* –an email conversation with Mika Hannula (Curator and Professor of Artistic Research, born in Finland, based in Berlin) between 6.10 and 2.12.2014, based on viewing the works at a colleague's studio in Helsinki 30.9.2014. In the possession of the artist.

*Outside the Law and on Tao* – with Ma Yongfeng (Artist and Curator, born in Shanxi province, based in Beijing) and Alessandro Rolandi (Artist and Curator, born in Italy, based in Beijing) viewing of the work at my Beijing studio 25.1.2015. Transcription and recording in the possession of the artist. Informal conversation with Yu Bogong (Artist, born in Inner Mongolia, based in Beijing) and Megumi Shimizu (Artist, born in Japan, based in Beijing). The conversation was translated (Chinese-English) by Kiki Zhu and is based on viewing of the works in my Beijing studio 15.1.2015. Transcription in the possession of the artist.

Discussion with artist Huang Xiaopeng during my lecture presentation 'Balls of Coal, Spirits, Sand and Dust: Conversing the informal in Huangbian Station Research Institute / Guangzhou 10.12.2015.

Private discussions with residents in the villages and viewers in the exhibitions, including discussions with Zhao Shifu and Mr Wang

## Appendix D. List of exhibitions, presentations, publication, prizes and funding

One Hundred Ten Thousand (2011-12), Blackballing (2013) and/or Rituals to Mutations (2013) are included:

2012

Exhibition/Studio presentation at Wherewhere Art Space, Caochangdi, Beijing

Exhibition Shantou Festival for Public Art, Shantou, China (solo)

Exhibition Gallery Lumen Travo, Amsterdam (solo)

Review Metropolis M Holland Vincent van Velsen

Review Mister Motley Holland Daan van Tricht

2013

Exhibition Organhaus, Chongqing, China (solo)

Lecture/presentation Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki

Lecture/presentation Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts/ Organhaus Chongqing

Lecture/presentation Institute for Provocation, Beijing

Uncuttalks' Soundcloud, conversation on social engagement, with Alessandro Rolandi

Feature Pipeline Magazine 38/2013 Hong Kong Cristina Sanchez-Koryzeva

2014

Lecture/presentation Three Shadows Photography Art Center, Beijing

Presentation at Kone Foundation Saari Residency, Finland

Presentation at the Finnish Embassy, Beijing

Exhibition Star Gallery, Beijing

2014-2015

Exhibition Skaftfell Center for Visual Art, Iceland (solo)

TV Reportage on the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service

2015

Presentation and dialogues, Iowa Community, Beijing

Presentation, Associate PhD Research Collective (APRC), Dutch Art Institute

Presentation, Dushanbe Art Ground, State University of Visual Arts and Design of Tajikistan

Feature Helsingin Sanomat (Main newspaper in Finland) 23.12.2015

Lecture/Presentation Huangbian Station Research Centre of Times Museum, Guangzhou

2016

Exhibition Star Gallery, Beijing

Exhibition Gallery Huuto, Helsinki (solo)

Exhibition (solo), seminar and publication

Arts and Human Rights in China and the EU

by the EU Delegate to China in collaboration with Embassy of Finland, Beijing

Must See Beijing, Art Forum Asia

Review Hiart China Lu Xia 23.3.2016

UN Women, Women of China 7.11.2016

European Delegation to China 2.11.2016

#### Prizes

*One Hundred Ten Thousand* (2011-12) won first prize for visual presentation at Shantou Festival for Public Art in 2013.

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